

CINEFANTASTIQUE

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XENA WARRIOR PRINCESS

STAR WARS I:
THE PHANTOM EMPIRE
THE MUMMY
IDLE HANDS
THE MATRIX
DAVID CRONENBERG
EXISTENZ

Volume 31 Numbers 5



XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS



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VOLUME 31 NUMBER 5

"The Magazine with a Sense of Wonder"

MAY 1999

Welcome to our first cover story devoted to the making of TV hit XENA, WARRIOR PRINCESS. The quirky fantasy series and companion show to HERCULES, THE LEGENDARY JOURNEYS has become a staple of TV syndication that is more popular in the ratings than even STAR TREK. Now in its fourth season on the air, the Sword & Sorcery adventure show from Renaissance Pictures—the folks who brought you THE EVIL DEAD and DARKMAN movie series—runs an amazing gamut from action drama to farcical comedy—they've even done a musical episode! But whatever the tenor of the show, the result is consistently fun to watch, giving the series a loyal cadre of viewers that other imitators have been unable to attract.

New York correspondent and Xenophile Dan Scapperotti provides this issue's look behind-the-scenes at the making of the show, including an exclusive interview with New Zealand star Lucy Lawless. Scapperotti also interviews Renaissance producer and series creator Rob Tapert, who founded the company with director Sam Raimi. Tapert, a fan of Hong Kong action filmmaking had always wanted to introduce a female action heroine to television, and crafted a show unlike any other. In the process he fell in love with and married his leading lady. Lawless calls XENA "a great job" and Tapert "the man of my dreams."

On the movie front, as we all wait for the opening of STAR WARS, Lawrence French provides the latest news on the super-secretive prequel. Also previewed is the highly anticipated opening of David Cronenberg's videogame-made-flesh horror eXistenZ. Dennis Fischer takes a look at IDLE HANDS, a teen horror comedy from Roger Corman protege Rodman Flender. And Joe Fordham provides a peek at THE MUMMY, Universal's big-budget attempt to open a new horror franchise.

Also included is a report from the set in Australia devoted to the making of THE MATRIX, a startling science fiction effort from the directors of BOUND.

Frederick S. Clarke



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AMUSING INSPIRATION

THE MUSE (Miramax)

In his latest directing effort, which he co-wrote with Monica Johnson, Albert Brooks stars as screenwriter Steven Phillips, whose successful career comes to a screeching halt due to a case of writer's block. Phillips will do anything to regain his livelihood, if only he can find the inspiration to start writing again. Fortunately, help arrives in the form of a real life Muse (played by Sharon Stone, pictured). As usual, Brooks pokes plenty of fun at himself in the form of his on-screen persona, but this time out he also aims his sights on Hollywood, as Phillips gambles his career, marriage, and sanity on the Muse's ability to help him churn out a comeback script. Andie MacDowell and Jeff Bridges co-star.

June 4



THE MUMMY (Universal)

April 30

Writer-director Stephen Sommers has succeeded where George Romero, Joe Dante, and Clive Barker have failed, remaking Universal's classic thriller. Sommers got the greenlight by presenting producer Jim Jacks with an eighteen-page treatment that took the 1932 Boris Karloff story and used it as a spring-board for a new approach. "I liked the original basic concept of THE MUMMY very much," Sommers noted. "Basically a guy falls in love; he does a bad thing; he gets cursed; he spends 3000 years alive in a sarcophagus. What I wanted to do was to make it much more of a romantic adventure movie about a French Foreign Legionnaire, Rick O'Connell [Brendan Fraser], who hooks up with this British Librarian, Evelyn Carnahan [Rachel Weisz]. The two of them go off in search of a lost city where they think there's treasure buried. They end up digging up the Mummy, Imhotep [Arnold Vosloo], who wakes up, regenerates, and brings with him the ten plagues of Egypt as he tries to revive his princess. That's the story in a nutshell." SEE PAGE 14

Joe Fordham

THE PHANTOM MENACE (Fox) May 21

Sixteen years after RETURN OF THE JEDI, George Lucas finally presents his prequel to the original STAR WARS trilogy. Will it be worth the wait? SEE PAGE 8

SUPERNOVA (MGM)

September

This film was almost set to open on March 12—until a dispute between the studio and director Walter Hill left the film in post-production limbo. Having completed principal photography, Hill wanted more time for further shooting; Metro Goldwyn Mayer, on the other hand, wanted to test screen the film first, before ponying up any additional bucks. Hill objected to the test screenings and left; MGM will complete the film without his involvement, although his name will probably remain on the credits as director.

THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Columbia)

May 28

Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin exec produced this adaptation of a '70s German TV series, about a business tycoon (Armin Mueller-Stahl) leading a double life: one in the contemporary, real world; the other in a technologically-created 1937. SEE CFQ 31:4:10.

AUSTIN POWERS: THE SPY WHO SHAGGED ME (NL) June 11

Michael Myers returns as the International Man of Mystery (and as his diabolical nemesis, Dr. Evil) in this sequel to the sleeper hit of two years ago. Also returning is Robert Wagner, joined by newcomers Heather Graham and Rob Lowe.

BLACK MASK (Artisan) April 30

Hoping to cash in on the blockbuster success of martial arts star Jet Li's U.S. debut in LETHAL WEAPON 4, Artisan Entertainment has dubbed and edited this Tsui Hark Hong Kong Fant-Asia production for American consumption. Li plays the titular character, a member of a special combat squad rendered impervious to pain through brain surgery. SEE PAGE 58

DEEP BLUE SEA (WB) August

A May 14 debut has been pushed back to August for this film that tries to out-jaw JAWS by detailing what can go wrong when sharks are bred to have a level of intelligence matching that of dolphins, while still retaining their aggressive instincts. Stellan Skarsgard and Samuel Jackson star for director Renny Harlin (A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 4), working from a script by Duncan Kennedy and John Zinman.

EXISTENZ (Dimension) April 23

Set in the near future, the new film from writer-director David Cronenberg, details a world where video game designers are superstars and players can log on directly through a socket in their spinal cord. Jennifer Jason Leigh stars as a designer who must enter her own game when her life is threatened. Jude Law, Ian Holm, and Willem Dafoe co-star. SEE PAGE 7

IDLE HANDS (Columbia) April 23

This so-called "gruesome comedy-horror film" is about what happens when the devil possesses the right hand of a clueless slacker (played by Devon Sawa). Roger Corman-graduate Rodman Flender directed, from a script by Terri Hughes & Ron Milbauer. SEE PAGE 10

THE MATRIX (WB) April 2

This big-budget science-fiction effort, produced by Joel Silver and starring Keanu Reeves, jumping back and forth between February and the Summer and finally landing somewhere in between. Lawrence Fishburn co-stars. Joel Silver (DEMOLITION MAN) produced. Larry and Andy Wachowski (BOUND) wrote and directed. SEE PAGE 16

MIGHTY PEKING MAN (Rolling Thunder) April (exclusive)

Quentin Tarantino's Rolling Thunder and Cowboy Booking International team up to release this 1977 Hong Kong production from the Shaw Brothers, which will play a series of midnight bookings across the country. The KING KONG-type story follows a team of explorers who discover a giant ape "as big as a mountain" in the Himalayas. The ape is brought back to civilization as a carnival sideshow attraction, but (of course) breaks free and goes on a rampage.

RELEASE SCHEDULE

Upcoming cinefantastique at a glance, along with a word or two for the discriminating viewer.

compiled by Jay Stevenson
(unless otherwise noted)



NO TOGAS, PLEASE!

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (Fox)

Shakespeare's fanciful play follows the romantic entanglements of four star-crossed lovers who flee into the woods, where they encounter fairy queens, satyrs, water nymphs, and the mischievous trickster Puck (Stanley Tucci, pictured). This filmization also stars Christian Bale, Calista Flockhart, Kevin Kline, Rupert Everett, and Michelle Pfeiffer. Previous productions have been set in different historical periods, but this film takes place, at least in some ways, in Italy at the turn of the century. But, writer-director Michael Hoffman, currently in post-production on his film version of the play, pointed out that the play is not tied to any specific time: "It starts in a kind of fantasy world inhabited by mythological characters who actually behave quite naturalistically, in spite of the many classical references they make. And then you move to a group of artisans or workmen who sound like they're from the west of England, and then you go into a forest which seems to be informed by both the classical world, but also by English folk tradition. So it's a very peculiar play in that way. As much as any of Shakespeare's plays, it's kind of free of time and place. You have to come in and impose something on it. But I thought it was best to avoid togas" he added, with a laugh.

Douglas Eby

June 4

HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC

BLACK SCORPION

Roger Corman spins made-for-cable superheroine into a TV series.

by Sue Feinberg
& Judd Hollander

Take the Dark Knight theme from *BATMAN*, add the action of *XENA*, the cartoonish atmosphere of *DICK TRACY*, the mystique of *WONDER WOMAN* and the byplay of *LOIS AND CLARK*—and you come up with *BLACK SCORPION*, the world's newest superhero, coming soon to television screens near you, courtesy of Roger Corman's Concorde/New Horizons studios. Newcomer Michelle Lintel, a former Miss Kansas, stars in the dual identities of Darcy Walker and the Black Scorpion—a cop by day and vigilante superhero by night.

After conventional law enforcement proved ineffective at stopping the supervillain who gunned down her policeman father, Darcy donned the skintight uniform and dark mask of the Black Scorpion. With the help of such gadgets as a ring which shoots electric bolts of energy and her special Scorpion Mobile (equipped with extras like laser beam headlights), she patrols the City of Angels (a parallel Los Angeles) keeping the metropolis safe for all decent people. And she certainly has her hands full in that respect, for the criminal element is not of your average *NYPD BLUE* variety. Rather, these are supervillains of the *BATMAN* type: After-shock, who can create earthquakes; Minerva Stone, also known as "Medusa," and Inferno, who starts fires instead of stopping them. (In a further Caped Crusader connection, two of the villains [Breathmaker and Clockwise] are played by *BATMAN* alumni Adam West and Frank Gorshin.)

Black Scorpion has more than just supervillains to worry about. The police see her as a costumed vigilante, and would like nothing better than to put her behind bars. (Much as the cops did with Batman and Superman in their early comic book days.) This creates problems for Darcy, who finds she must walk a continually shrinking fine line between her two existences.



Exec producer Roger Corman poses with Michelle Lintel, who stars in *BLACK SCORPION*, a completed TV series that Corman hoped to sell at MIPCOM.

Things are not made easier by the attraction Darcy feels for her partner Steve Rafferty, a kind of male Lois Lane, played by Scott Valentine, (of *FAMILY TIES* fame). Noted Valentine, "We go right up to the point where they almost kiss, and I always back down, saying 'No, we must maintain a level of professionalism.'" Fortunately all is not doom and gloom in the City of Angels. Like *BATMAN*, *XENA*, and *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*, the *BLACK SCORPION* TV series contains a healthy helping of humor, according to Corman, one of the show's executive producers.

However, just as Batman sometimes worries about how he lets the "Manhunter overwhelm the Man," Darcy faces a somewhat similar crisis in her dual existence as she finds the Black Scorpion guise is bringing out a different persona in her. While Darcy is the Black Scorpion, she's tougher, more sure of herself and is also more of a sexual being. (After saving Steve Rafferty from the villain of the week, she usually gives him a kiss before vanishing into the shadows.) And as time goes on, Darcy finds herself getting so preoccupied with her other identity that she begins to

alienate everybody she works with.

Black Scorpion did not begin as a comic book character. She arrived via two successful TV-movies, starring Joan Severance, which Corman produced for the Showtime cable network under the banner *ROGER CORMAN PRESENTS*. When those efforts received very high ratings and garnered interest worldwide, Corman got the idea to do a series based on the character.

A number of circumstances conspired to move the *BLACK*

continued on next page

American Horror

Fresh from the critical success of executive producing the Oscar-nominated art house hit *GODS AND MONSTERS*, Clive Barker is now preparing to revive his own career as a writer-director, which has been on hold since the box office disappointment of *LORD OF ILLUSIONS*, a major studio release from MGM in 1995.

Barker is developing an original horror film for New Line Cinema, which has been tentatively titled *AMERICAN HORROR*, which is an attempt to create an original American horror iconography on the magnitude of such European horror icons as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and the *Wolfman*. The story will focus on the American railroad in the Old West (circa 1866) as it spreads through Illinois and Wyoming.

Barker told *Daily Variety* that most of the classic horror movies tend to have monsters based on European myths and superstitions, adding, "I'm not interested in returning to the tired old Gothic type. I want to create a new myth—an American myth."

New Line's Michael DeLuca, who is well-versed in horror literature, is a fan of Barker's work and hopes that this first-time collaboration will lead to future projects, not to mention sequels; *AMERICAN HORROR* is being planned as the beginning of a potential franchise for the mini-major studio. "I don't have any problem with something that lasts for more than one movie," said Barker. "A second film can often be stronger than the first." □

Short Notes

It looks as if *HOME IMPROVEMENT*'s Tim Allen will take the lead in *GALAXY QUEST*, a comedy from DreamWorks about an actor who assumes his TV space captain persona in real life when he is recruited by aliens to save their planet. ☹️ Roger Corman abandoned plans to produce a *SCREAM* parody entitled *I'LL SCREAM IF YOU KNOW WHAT I DID LAST SUMMER AT THE SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE* after hearing the announcement that Dimension Pictures (owners of the *SCREAM* franchise) had their own parody set to be directed by Keenan Ivory Wayans, *LAST SUMMER I SCREAMED BECAUSE FRIDAY THE 13TH FELL ON HALLOWEEN*. ☹️ Now that the deal to make *AMERICAN PSYCHO* with Oliver Stone directing Leonardo DiCaprio has fallen apart, Mary Harron, who co-wrote the screenplay adaptation, is back in the director's chair, and her original choice for the title role, Christian Bale, is in the front running, depending on casting of co-stars. □

MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATRE

Season Ten on the Satellite of Love launches after news of show's demise.

by Dan Cziraky

It's a milestone that wasn't supposed to happen: the Satellite of Love is in its tenth year of orbit. The producers at Best Brains decided to celebrate their tenth anniversary debut on April 11 with a special episode featuring return appearances by series creator Joel Hodgson and former cast member Frank Conniff (both currently working on ABC-TV's *SABRINA, THE TEEN-AGE WITCH*). They recreated their familiar roles ("Joel Robinson" and "TV's Frank") in an episode that saw Joel return to repair malfunctions on the Satellite of Love while the deceased Frank manifested in the form of a "Soultaker" (inspired by the title of that week's bad movie, starring Joe Estevez).

After seven seasons on Comedy Central and a feature film that was torpedoed by the very studio that released it, *MST-3K* was set adrift by the cable network in 1996. Fortunately, the Sci-Fi Channel—on the lookout for original programming to fill out its schedule of *LOST IN SPACE* reruns and *HELLRAISER* I, II, III marathons—rescued the Peabody Award-winning series from *TV Guide* crossword puzzle obscurity. ("It was the show that we got the most questions about, even though we didn't air it," Sci-Fi Channel assistant programmer Ray Cannella explained at the time.)

The February 1996 debut on



To celebrate the Season Ten debut, current star Mike Nelson (left) welcomed back creator and original star Joel Hodgson back for a return appearance.

Sci-Fi Channel was a hit, and the network ordered a full season's 22 episodes. Cast members Michael J. Nelson ("Mike Nelson") and Kevin Murphy ("Tom Servo") were joined by writers Mary Jo Pehl ("Pearl Forrester") and Bill Corbett, who not only replaced departing cast member Trace Beaulieu as the voice of "Crow T. Robot" but soon joined the cast as the pasty-faced alien "Observer (a.k.a. "Brain Guy"). In an early story arc from the season, Murphy also took on the role of evolutionarily advanced ape, "Professor Bobo." Now the Satellite of Love traveled from planet to

planet, pursued by Pearl's rocket-fitted van. In 1998, the SOL settled orbit around Earth while Pearl and her cronies set up in her ancestral castle.

"There were several factors" for abandoning the planet-hopping, according to Murphy, "not the least of which is that any network that shows our show usually just puts the episodes in order *one* time. If you're wandering around, trying to keep the storyline going for an entire season got to be a little bit trying because, if you watch reruns, you'll see these things playing *hopelessly* out of sequence, and they seem a little odd. You come in on a show you know and love, and suddenly there's a bunch of guys in ancient Rome. What the hell are they doing there?"

Despite the changes, the basic premise remains the same: Mike and the 'bots are forced to watch cheesy movies by a mad scientist as part of a goofy experiment. *SOULTAKER*, the film skewered in the season opener, will be followed by such low-quality titles as Ted V Mikels' *THE GIRL IN GOLD BOOTS*, *MERLIN'S SHOP OF MYSTICAL WONDERS* with Ernest Borgnine, *FUTURE WAR*, *BLOODWATERS OF DR. Z*, *BOGEY CREEK 2: THE LEGEND CONTINUES*, *TRACK OF THE MOON-BEAST*, and *FINAL JUSTICE*.

Unfortunately, as *MST-3K* was preparing to launch its new season,

Production Starts



THE CROW: SALVATION

Hoping to overcome the disappointing reaction to *THE CROW: CITY OF ANGELS*, Ed Pressman Films plunges on with the third film in the franchise, which is filming in Salt Lake City, Utah. Eric Mabius stars as the new Crow of the title, aided by Kirsten Dunst. Bharat Nailuri directs, from a script by Chip Johannessen (an alumni of *THE X-FILES*.) A previously discussed script, by rocker Rob Zombie, may still be filmed at a later date, though not as part of the *CROW* franchise.

ROCKY AND BULLWINKLE

Robert DeNiro co-produces this combo of live-action and animation, based on the well-remembered cartoon. The cast includes DeNiro, Jason Alexander (as Boris Badenov), and Rene Russo (as Natasaha Fatale). Des McAnuff (who produced *THE IRON GIANT* and directed the '90s stage version of *The Who's Tommy*) directs.

news broke that Sci-Fi Channel would not be ordering episodes for next season. The announcement followed weeks of rumors: a time slot change to Sunday (11pm Eastern Time, with an 11am rebroadcast on Saturday) had already led the *Houston Chronicle* to speculate that the end was near. The cancellation was apparently due to fluctuating ratings, and a new cadre of upper management since the network was acquired by former Paramount and Fox Broadcasting honcho, Barry Diller.

The announcement arrived before this season had finished taping, so the crew will have a chance to do a farewell episode. The producers at Best Brains have, in the past, orchestrated letter writing campaigns from their fans. But they opted not to take that course this time, in order to maintain cordial relations with the network, which could result in future shows. Meanwhile, there is a slim possibility that Best Brains could continue producing *MST-3K*—if another network decided to pick up the show. □

BLACK SCORPION

continued from previous page/ *SCORPION* series away from Showtime and position it as a possible entrant in the network or syndicated series sweepstakes. (There were also some casting changes, which resulted in the decision to go with Lintel as the lead.) The show was filmed on a budget of approximately \$20 million. "I don't know of any other show that can say they [have] digital effects, special effects, stunts, comedy and drama [all in one]," noted producer Marta M. Mobley. Also interesting was Corman's decision not only to finance the show himself, but to film an entire series of 22 episodes without having a distributor lined up.

He plans to sell the series to MIPCOM, the international television market. "I thought if somebody actually came to the market with 22 shows and said, 'Here's your entire year's programming,' that if the programming was good, you'd get more money," Corman explained. And if the series catches on with the public, a second one will go before the cameras. All those involved have high hopes for the series. Corman calls it a "comic book action show that is very sexy," with elements of humor. If the TV viewing audiences agrees, there just may be a new superhero in town for some time to come. □

eXistenZ

Video-gaming David Cronenberg style.

By Alan Jones

Internationally launched at the recent Berlin Film Festival, David Cronenberg's new science fiction fantasy returns the cult Canadian director to the darkly original universe of his earlier works, especially *VIDEODROME*. Set in a near future, *eXistenZ* depicts a society in which video game designers are worshiped as superstars and players can organically enter their favorite pastime via a bio-port socket situated at the base of the spinal column. Miramax opens the film on the art house circuit April 23.

Jennifer Jason Leigh plays game inventor Allegra Geller. Her latest amusement, *eXistenZ*, taps so deeply into its user's fears and desires that it blurs the boundaries between reality and escapism. The phantasmagorically diseased thrill ride, packed with Cronenberg's patented Shape of Rage notions and surrealist nightmares, really takes flight when Allegra is made an assassination target by fanatics worried about the Antenna Research toy company's commitment to deforming reality. Together with her bodyguard Ted Pikul (Jude Law), Allegra must enter her latest brainchild and explore the areas altered by sinister industrial espionage to expose the villains.

Naturally, nothing is what it seems in Cronenberg's visceral-versa Playstation realm where "You have to play the game." For *eXistenZ* is a world where players use breathing MetaFlesh game pods that are built from synthetic DNA crossbred with the nervous systems of fish; where two headed amphibians roam the wilds; where mutant reptiles are served up in a weird Chinese restaurant and teeth-firing guns made out of animal gristle are the combat weapon of choice.

Ian Holm, Willem Dafoe, Christopher Eccleston and Sarah Polley also go along



Jennifer Jason Leigh as video game inventor Allegra Geller, plugged-in Cronenberg-style, opening April 23 from New Line. Below: Cronenberg directs.



for Cronenberg's art-house horror ride in *eXistenZ*. The cutting edge Abominable Showman devised the projects after interviewing fugitive writer Salman Rushdie for a magazine feature. Cronenberg was struck by the idea of

an artist who suddenly finds himself on a hit list for religious or philosophical reasons and is forced to flee into hiding. Noted Cronenberg, "That's why I use the word *fatwa* in the screenplay. Because of my natural inclinations I decided to make that person a game designer rather than a writer, thinking that game design could possibly ascend to the level of art."

However, the idea of entering the game to find out who has sabotaged it from the inside came much later as an afterthought. Said Cronenberg, "I thought it would be a movie about a game designer on the run from fanatics. Then, as I started to write it, I was desperate to get myself into the game and I thought—well, if I'm desperate to get into the game, I guess the audience is going to be desperate. Although it could be kind of an artful surrealistic thing not to go into the game, I couldn't deny everybody that

pleasure—and I wanted to know what I would come up with."

He continued, "It seemed to me that what people are really doing in computer and video games is trying to get closer and closer to fusing themselves with the game. The idea that a game would plug right into your nervous system made perfect sense to me, because putting on glasses and gloves is a crude attempt to fuse your nervous system with the game. So I went that little bit further—if I want to be the game, the game will also want to be me. It's really an attempt to fuse the fantasy and make it real, physical and organic. It's the game made flesh."

The game *eXistenZ* became the perfect venue to embrace two of Cronenberg's favorite themes: the extent to which we

create our own levels of reality, and the idea of a creative act being a dangerous thing to the creator. Noted Cronenberg, "These are the two poles that are the basis of *eXistenZ*. So thematically it connects to *CRASH*, *VIDEODROME*, *NAKED LUNCH* and *M. BUTTERFLY*."

Cronenberg also slyly repossesses his trademark "Body Horror" imagery. Once Jennifer Jason Leigh and Jude Law were on board as the central pawns, he encouraged both actors to research existentialism and gave them a suggested reading list including the academic works of Jean Paul Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus. And because the actors change guises throughout the course of the film depending on whether they are in the game or not, Cronenberg wanted them all to speak with different accents. Noted Cronenberg, "The reason for the different accents has to do with the idea of a character whose projection of himself plays the game; and how much of that is a fantasy, what he wants to be or is afraid to be. On another level, it's a very existential approach to acting, which is basically saying that to be alive is also to act. You create yourself. You create the character and the drama that you are. Consciously or unconsciously, that's what we do." □

STAR WARS

THE PHANTOM MENACE

George Lucas abandons parts 7-9: life's too short.

By Lawrence French

A long time ago in a Galaxy far, far away:

Turmoil has engulfed the Galactic Republic. The taxation of trade routes to outlying star systems is in dispute. Hoping to resolve the matter with the blockade of deadly battleships, the greedy Trade Federation has stopped all shipping to the small planet of Naboo. While the Congress of the Republic endlessly debates this alarming chain of events, the Supreme Chancellor has secretly dispatched two Jedi Knights, the guardians of peace, to settle the conflict.

EXT. TATOOINE

A disheveled boy, ANAKIN SKYWALKER, runs in from the junk yard. He is about nine years old, very dirty, and dressed in rags.

So opens *THE PHANTOM MENACE*, George Lucas' eagerly awaited first chapter in the *STAR WARS* saga. When Lucas first began work on the script, in 1995, he began with only some brief notes. Lucas explained to Lyn Hale, the publicist for *THE PHAN-*

TOM MENACE, that the original outline for the three prequels was only about 15 pages long.

"The whole early part was written to set up the [first *STAR WARS*] films that were made," observed Lucas. "I had to sort of figure out who everybody was, where they came from, how they got to be where they were, and what the dynamic relationships were between everybody."

Lucas took his outline and began work by expanding it to include approximately 50 scenes for each of the three prequels. "I basically have to come up with 150 scenes," asserted Lucas. "If I come up with a few a day, towards the end of the process, I will really start going through the outline and filling in all the blanks—finishing it and putting in all the detail and that sort of thing. Then I start the hard part, the actual writing of the pages."

By beginning with such a rough outline, Lucas had the freedom to change characters and situations, none of which were ever set in stone in the first place. Lucas further explained the flexible nature of his scripting process, stating, "When I have an idea for a character, usually the character comes alive



Anakin Skywalker addresses the Jedi Council.

and metamorphoses into something else, or another kind of character. If you take the first draft of *STAR WARS*, you can find the central characters that always existed, but they had different names, shapes or sizes. But the core of the character is still there and growing. It's just trying to find the right persona to carry forward that personality."

A good example of this occurs in early drafts of *STAR WARS*, where the character of Grand Moff Tarkin (Peter Cushing) is a leader of the rebellion on Yavin, who comes up with the idea of using small fighter ships to attack the Death Star. By the final script, Lucas has transformed Tarkin into an agent of the Emperor, making him the actual builder of the Death Star, rather than one of its attackers. With such a slim outline for the prequels, it's not much of a surprise to hear Lucas' revelation that there was never any story material for the final three sequels—the ones that were supposed to continue the nine part saga, after the ending of *RETURN OF THE JEDI*.

"It really ends at part six," Lucas told *Vanity Fair*. "When you see it in six parts you'll understand. I never had a story for the sequels." Of course, it was Lucas himself who always maintained there was at least an outline for the final three chapters (episodes 7, 8, & 9). It appears the real reason for his abrupt abandonment of the Force, is that in May of 2005, (when the last of the current trilogy is scheduled for release), Lucas will turn 61. "I'll be at a point in my age where to do another trilogy would take 10 years," said Lucas. "My oldest daughter was born during *RETURN OF THE JEDI*, and since then I slowed down quite a bit. I focused more on my family, and making *THE PHANTOM MENACE* is the first time I go back and try to do a movie of this scale, with this much intensity." One of the reasons Lucas embarked on the current set of prequels, was due to the new advances in technology he can utilize. "I get to do a lot of things now, that I couldn't

Liam Neeson as Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn searches for the young Skywalker on the desert planet Tatooine.





The Council, in session on the Galactic Republic's homeworld of Coruscant, is headed by a youthful Yoda.

do before," explained Lucas. "I can create things that weren't possible to create before. I was always—and I will be on *THE PHANTOM MENACE*—at the limit of what is possible in terms of storytelling. Things have advanced so far in the last 20 years, in terms of your ability to portray things on the screen."

Lucas also noted in a recent article for *Premiere*, that digital technology will allow him to get closer to his grandiose vision. "The idea of being able to explore my imagination and make it literal is exciting," noted Lucas. "It moves me forward to try to get my visions onto the screen. When I was young, I had ambitions for some things to be brilliant, and when it came out less than brilliant, I was very upset about it. Who knows, maybe it's better that way—because the things that have come out exactly the way I wanted them, have not been very successful. I think I'll be able to get closer to what I imagine things to be like with this film."

Among the many new treats Lucas has promised for *THE PHANTOM MENACE*, is the portrayal of the Jedi Knights, in the days when there were thousands of them to guard the peace and justice of the Galaxy. The two Jedi Knights sent to Naboo at the outset of the story, are the young Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) and Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson), Kenobi's mentor, who holds a seat on the Jedi council (along with Yoda).

Lucas disclosed some Jedi characteristics, while talking to Lyn Hale: "The Jedi are like negotiators," explained Lucas. "They aren't people that go out and blow up planets, or shoot down things. They're more of a one-to-one combat type. In *THE PHANTOM MENACE* I wanted the form of the fighting and the role of the Jedi Knight to be special. More spiritual and more intellectual than just something like a fighter or a superhero."

In an effort to top the light saber battles of the first *STAR WARS* movies, Lucas is

attempting to bring a more dynamic element to the new swordplay that will be occurring between the Jedi masters and their chief opponent, the maleficent Darth Maul, (played by martial arts expert Ray Park).

"I was looking for the kind of sword-fighting we had already done," said Lucas, "but I wanted a more energized version of it, because we actually never really saw Jedi's at work—we'd only seen old men (Obi-Wan), crippled halfdroid-halfmen (Darth Vader), and young boys (Luke). To see the Jedi fighting in their prime, I wanted a much more energetic and faster version of what we'd been doing."

The action of the new film will take place largely on three planets: the already familiar desert planet of Tatooine, where the nine-year-old Anakin Skywalker is growing up; on Naboo, home to the royal Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman), as well as several swamp-dwelling creatures, such as the Nuna (a flightless bird, similar to an ostrich, but without the long neck) and the Peko Peko (a Pterodactyl-like bird with an immense wing-span); and finally, on Coruscant, the capitol of the Galactic Republic, where both

“It really ends at part six,” Lucas told *Vanity Fair*. “When you see it in six parts you’ll understand. I never had a story for the sequels.”

—George Lucas, director—

the Senate and the Jedi Council convene.

Interestingly enough, Senator Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), who eventually becomes the Emperor—presumably by plotting with the Dark Lords of the Sith—represents Naboo in the Galactic Senate and is a benign presence in *THE PHANTOM MENACE*.

The actual design of Coruscant was previewed in a brief shot seen at the end of the *RETURN OF THE JEDI* special edition, and it promises to be a truly spectacular city, full of streamlined ultra modern skyscrapers, jutting several miles into the sky. The Jedi Council deliberates in a circular dome room, at the top of an imposing temple that looks vaguely like the Chrysler Building, but with huge windows, that afford breathtaking views of Coruscant.

As each new morsel of information about *THE PHANTOM MENACE* slowly leaks out, all the hype may eventually cause overwhelming expectations, that may be very hard to meet. Then, inevitably, the success engendered by the film will generate a backlash of criticism. For his part, Lucas professed these high expectations are not really affecting how he's making the movie. "The fact that the film is so anticipated," exclaimed Lucas, "allows me the freedom to be creative, in the way I'd like to be creative, without having to worry about what people think. On one level, I'm going to get slaughtered, no matter what I do. On another level, some people will like it. After you make a lot of movies, no matter what you do, you're going to get trashed on one side, while some people are going to love it." □

Young Anakin (Ben Glass) with Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) and Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman).





Rodman

By Dennis Fischer

"Idle hands are the devil's playground" is not only a popular saying, but also the premise behind Rodman Flender's new horror comedy. The film is about a teenage slacker whose demonically-possessed hand becomes a deadly threat. It's produced by Team Todd (sister producers Suzanne and Jennifer Todd), and stars Devon Sawa, Vivica A. Fox, Jessica Alba, and Jack Noseworthy.

Closer in intent to *THE EVIL DEAD II* than other killer hand movies (from *THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS* to *THE CRAWLING HAND*), *IDLE HANDS* hopes to attract the teen audience that flocked to the *SCREAM* movies, combining screams of terror with those of laughter. TriStar opens the film April 23.

IDLE HANDS is set on Halloween in the Northern California town of Bolan, with Devon Sawa as Anton Tobias, the self-described "laziest kid in America." But there's a murderer loose in Bolan and all signs point to Anton. "Anton becomes aware that he cannot control his

Vivica A. Fox (top) stars as Druid High Priestess Debi LeCure, the Van Helsing character hunting down evil forces wherever they may be. Below Left: Seth Green and a beheaded Eldon Henson, victims of a rampaging, animate hand. Below Right: Roger Corman graduate Rodman Flender directs Green and Henson.



IDLE HANDS

Flender directs a wild killer-hand romp.

hand," said Flender. "There's a killer in town and people are dying. He does not know that he is in fact the killer. He kills his best friends, and he tries to stop himself from doing it, but the hand gets the better of him."

Flender has directed such films as *LEPRECHAUN 2*, *IN THE HEAT OF PASSION*, and *THE UNBORN*, and has lately been directing such television series as *DAWSON'S CREEK*, *MILLENNIUM*, *DARK SKIES*, and *TALES FROM THE CRYPT*. He has also worked as a producer (*BODY CHEMISTRY*, *THE HAUNTING OF MORELLA*, *DEMON OF PARADISE*) and as an actor (*CARNOSAUR*, *BLACK SCORPION*, and *CRIMINAL HEARTS*).

Flender explained his ongoing association with horror. "Because I had done several things in the horror genre," he said, "I am continually sent a lot of horror scripts, most of them with Roman numerals in the title. This is the first one which grabbed my attention. I thought 'yeah, this is great.'"

"After *SCREAM* came out, a lot of people started making teenage horror films. The thing that is so different about [*IDLE HANDS*] is the element of the supernatural. Where *SCREAM* took a postmodern attitude towards *FRIDAY THE 13TH* kinds of movies, this seems to have elements of *THE EXORCIST* and *THE OMEN* and all those great supernaturally-themed films of the '70s and '80s. I thought that was different. I hadn't seen that before.

"And it's wacky. Every character, even people who only have one or two lines, are all bizarre, all strange, and kind of wonderful. They are not necessarily psychotic or out of their

"I am continually sent a lot of horror scripts," said Flender. "This is the first one that grabbed my attention. I thought 'yeah, this is great.'"



Devon Sawa as Anton, doing a Jim Carrey turn as a teen slacker whose hand gets the best of him, in a horror farce which TriStar opens nationwide April 23.

minds, though some of them are....

"It's like 'Hamlet.' Every character in *Hamlet* is great, even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even the walk-ons are all great, deep characters. This film is a lot like that in terms of every character is being well thought out and given a kind of quirky, offbeat twist."

The cast is dominated by young, up-and-coming talent. Sawa has appeared in *LONESOME DOVE*, was Casper as a real boy in *CASPER*, played Robin Hood in the Showtime film *ROBIN OF LOCKSLEY*, and has 12 feature films to his credit. Playing the

Druid High Priestess Debi Lecure, the vivacious Vivica A. Fox has been in such features as *INDEPENDENCE DAY*, *BOOTY CALL*, *BATMAN AND ROBIN*, and *WHY DO FOOLS FALL IN LOVE*. Jessica Alba as Anton's dreamgirl Molly, has worked on the recent Australian version of *FLIPPER*, and has appeared in *LEAVING LAS VEGAS* and *P.U.N.K.S.* Playing Anton's heavy metal neighbor who proves wise to the ways of satanism, Jack Noseworthy's credits include *EVENT HORIZON*, *ENCINO MAN*, *BARB WIRE*, and *BREAKDOWN* as well as the MTV series *DEAD AT 21*.

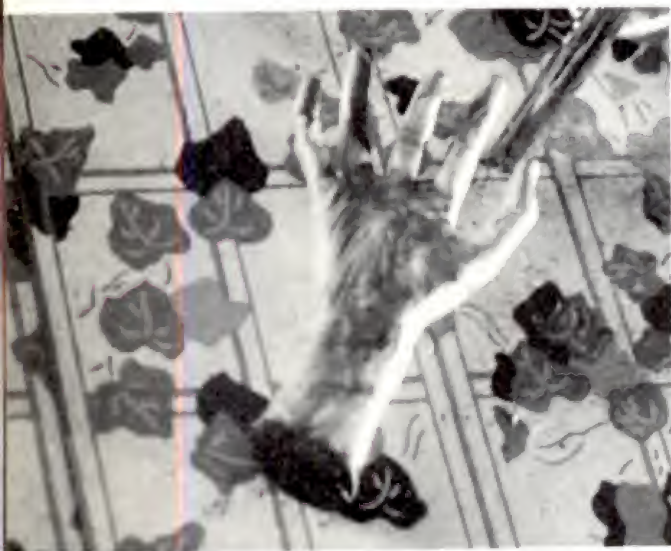
Of the casting, Flender noted, "I wanted good actors who could do comedy rather than sketch comedians. Devon is amazing. This will only work if we have basically a teenaged Jim Carrey, someone with that kind of physical dexterity and expression. I think we've got that with Devon. Every day he comes up with stuff that floors me. I'd seen him on *WILD AMERICA*, and then I'd seen him on some videotape tests, casting tapes. When I saw Devon in those tapes, I knew this movie could work."

Flender also researched past "hand movie" efforts. "I looked at *THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS* and others," he said. "We try to pay a little homage to all the hand movies. One of the things that was so great about *SCREAM* was that it really said, 'OK, we're in this culture, and horror films are part of this culture, and we're aware of that.' We're doing that in this movie as well. There is an awareness of *THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS* and Oliver Stone's *THE HAND, EVIL DEAD II*."

Though a comedy, Flender hopes to balance both the humor and the horror with makeup effects provided by the Greg Cannom group. "In terms of the gore level, we obviously can't do something that Lucio Fulci could," Flender said, "just in terms of standards and the rating system and all that. In some of the goriest scenes in the movie, we don't actually see what happens. I've chosen to play them off of people's faces, somebody watching this, which I actually think is much more horrifying because you are seeing how it affects somebody rather than the gruesomeness of the effect itself. Our actors are

so talented and so good that they help make that all the more horrifying."

In terms of the tone Flender hopes to achieve, he compares it to Jonathan Demme's *SOMETHING WILD*, "Because it just switched gears and you didn't know where it was going. *IDLE HANDS* is a movie that switches gears. One of the things I'm hoping to do is just to surprise people. With a lot of movies today, you watch the first five minutes and you pretty much know how they are going to end. I'm trying to make something



that's a little unpredictable, something where you're laughing one minute, screaming another minute.

"It's funny when you ask about comedy and horror. The first film I did for Roger [Corman] was a movie called *THE UNBORN*, which was pretty much a straight horror film, and I wanted to inject some humor in it, and I was talking to Roger about it, and I'll never forget something he said to me. He said, 'Always give the people something to laugh at, or else they will find something to laugh at.' Those words are very true."

Flender began his directorial career working for Corman, and when asked what he had learned from this past master of the genre, he responded, "I think Roger is certainly a pioneer of this genre with *LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS* and *BUCKET OF BLOOD*. I went back and watched *LITTLE SHOP* again before I jumped into this, because tonewise it successfully hit the right note. In *LITTLE SHOP*, every character is wacked out. It's got this strange tone. It's horrifying. Horrifying things happen in it, and hilari-

"We tried to pay a little homage to all the hand movies," said Flender. "There is an awareness of the *THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS* and *THE HAND...*"



Devon Sawa as Anton and Seth Green blast Anton's pesky disembodied hand (left) in a microwave, a horror romp a la Corman's *LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS*.

ous things happen in it too. That was really a model for this film."

Graduates of Corman's "earn while you learn" approach to filmmaking have had a tendency to either become very cost conscious or profligate spenders. Commented Flender, "Yeah, it's funny. I try be very cost conscious and stay on schedule because it's something I've learned to do and I don't want anyone mad at me over the budget. Others tend to completely rebel and go in the opposite direction like James Cameron."

Flender doesn't think that his past experiences with low-budget filmmaking have altered his style of filmmaking. "I think the material dictates the style," he said, "so I don't approach directing *PARTY OF FIVE* the way I approach directing this. It's just a different visual vocabulary, the tone is so different. I did an episode of *DAWSON'S CREEK* this year, which was sort of a bit of a parody of *SCREAM* in a small way where there is a killer in a small town. That was a little bit of a warmup for this movie in a way in that it had copied and we tried to put in a few scary

moments as well. It didn't quite go as far as this movie goes. It's great to really have enough freedom to go all out."

Regarding working in television, Flender noted, "I love directing television because I have worked with some of the best casts and the best scripts I have ever worked with. In terms of character development and dialogue, what they are doing in television now is fantastic. Ultimately, television is not a director's medium, it's a writer-producer's medium, and the job of the TV director is to fulfill the creator's vision, the executive producer's vision. Here I feel like I have a little more freedom."

Another advantage is that features are usually given more time to film than your average dramatic series episode. Nevertheless, Flender pointed out, "It has less to do with time, because I always feel crunched. There is never enough time. Even though I pretty much did both Corman movies in as many shooting days or fewer shooting days of this entire movie, that crunch feeling is still there. You feel there is never enough time. The freedom in movies versus

television is a little bit more about my vision, and it is still a collaboration. Devon brings so much, but it's nice to create a world from scratch rather than step into the world of *CHICAGO HOPE* or *MILLENIUM*, or whatever show I've done."

Flender offered his take on the main characters: "Anton, our lead played by Devon Sawa, is basically a slacker. This movie is a little bit like *CLERKS* meets *THE EXORCIST*. He just hangs out, gets high, watches TV, and doesn't think about anything. That's pretty much his life. The film title takes the saying, 'Idle hands are the devil's playground' literally. His hands are about as idle as they can be. His hands are a fertile soil for evil forces to inhabit.

"He's got two friends who are also slackers. One of them is a little more motivated because he also sells pot as well as smoking it. Vivica Fox is sort of the Van Helsing character of this movie. She comes from a line of Druidic priestesses who hunt down and fight evil forces. She is on a mission to try and stop the gates of hell from opening up. She's pretty wacky, too. She's got a raven named Quatrain. She lives in an Airstream motorhome, travelling around the country, trying to find evil wherever it is."

During the 10-week shoot, Sawa kept trying to break up the cast with comments about "hey, I need a hand here." However, the movie itself tries to avoid that approach to humor. The reason for his hand becoming possessed is never made clear, but is simply a consequence of his idleness.

Explained Flender, "The theme would be the title, 'idle hands are the devil's playground,' so keep yourself busy. One of the characters, a guy named Randy who is Anton's neighbor in the film, wonderfully played by Jack Noseworthy from *EVENT HORIZON*, is this heavy metal dude who is always working on his Ford monster truck. He tells Anton, 'Keep yourself busy, keep your hands busy,' and he doesn't get possessed. He's always working on his truck, even if you are just working on your truck, keep yourself busy." □

HANDS JOB

THE BEST WITH FIVE FINGERS

Magician Christopher Hart on his career sideline, specializing as a "hand performer" in horror films.

By Chuck Wagner

Let your fingers do the walking. Magician Christopher Hart has, and has achieved fame. Or at least his hand has.

"I had to audition for the *ADDAMS FAMILY* movie," Hart explained, "but I didn't have to audition for the sequel. Fortunately, I'm getting a name now in Hollywood. When they were looking for a hand for *IDLE HANDS*, I had two or three different producers recommend me. So I had a script sent to my agent. I'm becoming like the Sharon Stone of hand actors."

Hart's hand proved amazingly expressive as Thing in *THE ADDAMS FAMILY* movie, but Hart's hand was being asked to play a different kind of hand in *IDLE HANDS*.

"In this horror movie, this hand is very different," said Hart, flexing his famous hand to demonstrate. "I had to prove to the director that I had other ideas of ways to use my hand. This hand is completely evil. There's nothing friendly about it. So I developed other nuances that would give an evil, sinister quality to it."

One obvious question is, where is Hart during filming and how is his body hidden, or removed from footage?

"There are different techniques they use," he said. "Sometimes, if it's a tight shot of the hand, they just frame my body out. There's a two-and-a-half hour makeup job they do on my hand every day when I'm filming, making it look evil, blistered and boiled, with pus oozing out of my wounds."

"If it's a longer range shot, sometimes I'll have a green sleeve on, or a sleeve which allows them to use a computer to remove my body. But basically, a shot's usually shot twice. They'll shoot me doing a scene with the actors, where I'm crawling along the floor. Then I'll step out and they'll shoot it again, so when they erase my body they have a background to fill in. It's very tedious, time-consuming, technical work."

Sometimes, Hart had to contort his body away from his hand to meet the needs of the shot. This can be uncomfortable. But at least there's no dialogue to learn. Hart laughed. "There are no lines, obviously. It's interest-



Hart, wearing hand makeup by the Greg Cannom group, puts the monster through its paces for an effects shot. A stint as Thing in *THE ADDAMS FAMILY* started it all.

ing in that the scripts for my hand usually always just say, 'scampers to the door,' or 'the hand crawls along the floor,' or 'performs a certain action.' So it's really my challenge to make it interesting. A hand has no expression, it has no eyes. After awhile, it becomes kind of boring. So you find some nuance, some bit of business to do.

"I've discovered that it's mostly the hand interacting with other objects or other people that make it interesting, that convey a personality. But there's scenes in this movie that allow this. In one scene, one of the characters shoves her velvet red shoe into a fan to stop the fan blades spinning so she can escape through an air conditioning shaft. But the hand crawls up onto the shoe. It's going to remove it so she gets severed by this blade. But what happens is the hand lulls there for a second on the velvet shoe. It strokes, sort of seductively, this red velvet. It's sadistic of this hand to tease and play with the red velvet be-

fore removing the shoe."

Hart's hand is actually bigger than the hand of actor Devon Sawa's, which he plays. Noted Hart, "The way you get around that, in terms of being realistic, is when Devon cuts off his hand to stop himself from killing, he throws it in the microwave. He starts to nuke it, and it starts to blister and boil and burn up and swell. It takes on a physical difference and possessed evilness allows it to develop a life and shape of its own."

Of course, a famous hand has to be pampered and kept fit. The arm above must usually be shaved. "I get weird looks when I sign things in stores," Hart said, referring to the reaction a partially-bald arm usually gets. "I mainly make my living being a magician. That's what I love to do, being on stage performing."

Hart's right hand is the one that gets all the movie work. The left hand doesn't usually work, except when doing magic, although his left hand played an evil hand in the Fox TV movie *THE BODY POLITIC*, based on the Clive Barker short story detailing a revolution of human hands.

"It was pretty sedate because it was for television, so they really couldn't make it gory. Mick Garris directed that, and I had met and worked with him on a video he was shooting for the Addams Family with Michael Jackson. It never aired, but he remembered me from that."

Hart's most harrowing experience during filming *IDLE HANDS* involved the use of Krazy Glue to apply his makeup fingernails, which overheated when applied a little too liberally. "I never, ever felt intense pain as I did then," he said. "It was searing, like acid burning through my fingertips. You know, you get to a point with pain where you don't care about your surroundings anymore. I started screaming on the set!"

Fortunately for Hart, his hand was not burned...at least not too much. "The irony was they didn't use that take," Hart said with a chuckle.

The life of the hand actor can be an adventure, or—to paraphrase Omar Khayyam—"The moving hand acts, and having acted, moves on." □

THE MUMMY

By Joe Fordham

It's been 54 years since Universal Studios last gave serious screen time to the Mummy, arguably their third most popular horror icon after Frankenstein's Monster and Count Dracula. The character was first brought to the screen by Carl Laemmle Jr. with Boris Karloff in 1932. After that, it was done to death in four sequels, three of them with Lon Chaney Jr. Then it was bashed to bits by the Three Stooges and Abbott and Costello, amongst others. Finally, after all that, it was given a new lease on life by Hammer Films in the '60s.

The Mummy's history has been a checkered one at best. But the ancient prince will rise again, for the fourteenth time on a full-length feature screen, May 7.

Universal filmed their new epic reinvention of the series in Morocco and on soundstages at Shepperton Studios in England. It's their first straight-on, non-comic Mummy film since *THE MUMMY'S CURSE* in 1944.

The new *MUMMY*, directed by Stephen Sommers for Alphaville productions, stars Brendan Fraser (*GEORGE OF THE JUNGLE*), Rachel Weisz (*SWEPT FROM THE SEA*) and John Hannah (*SLIDING DOORS*), with Arnold Vosloo (*HARD TARGET*) filling Karloff's 3000-year-old shoes as Imhotep/Ardath Bey.

According to producer Jim Jacks, he and his co-producer, Sean Daniels, early on dubbed their latest take on mummy lore "Raiders of the Lost Mummy." After 16 weeks of prep with Sommers and production designer Allan Cameron, plus 86 days of shooting with director of photography Adrian Biddle, Jacks still concurs with this early referent. "It's not that inaccurate, although now I think the movie is a little more like *GUNGA DIN* than it is

Universal gives their monster franchise a "Raiders" makeover.



Brendan Fraser as French Foreign Legionnaire Rick O'Connell, discovering the sunken Egyptian city of Hamanuptra and the mummified evil of Imhotep.

RAIDERS. Cary Grant, for instance, is an out-and-out comic character in that film. John Hannah, in our movie, is very much in the tradition of Grant or David Niven. We also have the elements of a French Foreign Legion movie and *CASABLANCA*. We had a lot of fun with it. We were trying very hard to make things as exotic and as romantic as possible."

Which is not to say this version of *THE MUMMY* will be without its share of traditional mummy ingredients. "We don't really use the tana leaves," Jacks commented, referring to the revivifying brew instigated in the first 1940 sequel, *THE MUMMY'S HAND*. Anck-es-en-Amon is back as the reincarnated princess, object of Imhotep's affections, although she influ-

ences the plot in a more streamlined, action-oriented way.

"We decided not to make our female lead the reincarnation of Anck-es-en-Amon because it seemed a little coincidental," Jacks explained. "We felt it made the story more complicated than it needed to be to really play that out. We decided instead to make Rachel Weisz's character the first woman Imhotep lays eyes on as he comes alive. He decides he's going to use her bodily fluids and organs to bring Anck-es-en-Amon back to life."

As for the mummy himself, the common concept of the tall, bandaged marauder will certainly be served in a new, updated fashion—even though this character was actually more heavily popularized by Tom Tyler in *MUMMY'S HAND* and Lon Chaney Jr. in the films that followed the Karloff original. Jacks observed, "Bandage Head was not until the sequels. In fact that's not Imhotep, it's Kharis. We do have bandaged mummies in our film, but it's an army of guys that come to help Imhotep in the end."

Imhotep's legions are being created by the digital artists at Industrial Light and Magic, who are also developing technology to bring Imhotep back from the dead. "We have about 130 special effects shots," said Jacks. "And they're big effects shots. We had to create some new technology for this, basically a walking, talking man with pieces missing. British makeup effects supervisor Nick Dudman worked with ILM to create the mummy, based on Arnold Vosloo's performance. Arnold is where the mummy starts off and ends up, then there are stages where it's Arnold with pieces missing, and then there are stages where it's going to be a total ILM computer-generated construction."



Arnold Vosloo as Imhotep, the Mummy, fully restored and about to sacrifice Cairo librarian Rachel Weisz.

With visual effects underway in San Rafael, and Stephen Sommers working with his editor, Bob Ducsay, *THE MUMMY* shuffled towards its tentative May 7th premiere. That's an intimidating time for any opening, as the shadow cast by *STAR WARS* looms. "We're ducking and diving with them," admitted Jim Jacks. "I think we're going to have a movie that stands up with them, but we want to have enough distance so we can at least establish our movie before that monolith hits the market. Even going a couple weeks before is tricky. Our theory is if we can get in there, we think audiences will really like our movie, we'll get two big weeks and then, hopefully, we'll be well enough established so, if you can't get in to see *STAR WARS*, you'll go see *THE MUMMY*."

While Jacks is cautiously optimistic, he is also too experienced to make predictions at this half-formed stage. Jacks has been with the project throughout most of its gestation, which is said to be somewhere between 10 and 12 years. Jacks recalled, "When I came to Universal as an executive they were wanting to remake *THE MUMMY*. It's really been for us [at Alphaville], oh, eight or nine years pretty much full-time trying to get it together."

Screenwriting credits are currently under arbitration by the Writers Guild, a very sensitive and complicated process. One Internet source has listed eight different writers who have been associated with the project dating back to 1988. Like Imhotep himself, the project has been reborn many times, in many different hues.

Jacks recalled the evolution of the final version. "We went through a lot of directors at different times. We had people like Clive Barker, Joe Dante, George Romero, Mick Garris. A lot of people were involved at different times, but they were all different kinds of versions. I mean, Clive Barker's *THE MUMMY* was kind of a 'Hell-raiser Mummy.' Joe Dante had a John Sayles script that was actually quite good, but it was contemporary and there was always a problem with that. Also, at that time the studio really wanted to do it as a low budget, \$15 million, grab-it-and-growl kind of movie to exploit the title. Then there was kind of a shift around the time MCA was bought by Seagrams, and there became a real desire to exploit the Universal monsters, to really make some good 'A' movies with them. All of a sudden it went from being a low-budget venture to one where they were willing to spend some real money."

Jacks recalled how screenwriter Kevin Jarre (*TOMBSTONE*, *GLORY*, and one of

“We have tons of action, a lot of comedy, and, I think, some good scares. It seems to me that’s everything it should be.”

—Producer Jim Jacks—

the executive producers on this version of *THE MUMMY*) was brought in to provide the draft that led to Stephen Sommers' involvement. "[Universal executives] Mark Platt, Stacey Snyder and Casey Silver all read Kevin's script. They liked it, but it was a very dark, scary version of *THE MUMMY* and they decided it was not the take they wanted to go on. The reality was Universal really wanted a big event movie, and if we were going to do that it really had to be another version. The movie we're now making is going to be PG-13. In Kevin's script it was borderline whether it was going to be 'R' or 'NC-17.' I mean, it was like Coppola's *DRACULA*. It was a very fine script and we may do it some day in one of the sequels, but it was really, really dark. Very, very scary. Very upsetting.

"About this time I got a call from Todd Harris, an agent who I do a lot of business with at William Morris, who represents Stephen Sommers. He told me Steve was a huge Mummy fan. He'd read the Kevin Jarre script and liked it, but it was not the script he wanted to shoot. I liked Stephen's movies, so we met and talked about his take, which was very clearly high adventure, and fun, you know? Fun, fun, fun. We pitched this to Mark Platt, Stephen worked about three months on the script, we turned this in to Casey Silver, who called up the next morning and said, 'Let's try to make it.'"

Universal archives show the budget for the 1932 *MUMMY* as \$196,161. Jacks' comment was, "We're higher," but he

made no bones about the stakes involved this time around. "Ours is very much a big event summer movie. It's not even close to \$100 million, but, let's put it this way, it's over \$60 million. It's tough to make a movie for less than \$60 million if you have \$21 million in the effects budget. But we're very excited about the movie and I think we pay off everything we set up. We have tons of action, a lot of comedy and I think some good scares. It seems to me that's everything it should be, but you never know. Movies are funny things." □

Vosloo conjures as Imhotep in Mummy makeup designed by Nick Dudman.



THE MAKING OF THE MATRIX

The Wachowski Bros. launch sci-fi for the new millennium.

By Dennis Fischer

It's the future and Earth is dismal. A massive computer complex enslaves the population by keeping everyone in a virtual reality resembling the late 20th century. Rebels Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Trinity (Carrie-Ann Moss) follow the lead of Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) to set humanity free. Arrayed against them are deadly artificial intelligence agents, possessed with superhuman fighting abilities—this is the premise of *THE MATRIX*, the eagerly awaited science fiction blockbuster written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski, the auteurs of *BOUND*. Warner Bros. opened the film nationwide April 12.

One of the new faces in *THE MATRIX* is that of Australian Hugo Weaving, best known in America for his work in *PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT*, who plays the almost omnipotent Agent Smith, a construct of the Matrix computer designed to police virtual reality and to terminate agitators. Dressed in a suit, tie, and sunglasses, Smith has a steely, stoic presence, representing the ultimate in formidable special agents.

During a break in filming,



Keanu Reeves gets plucked from his cocoon in *THE MATRIX* by freedom fighters' wish to remove mankind's dependence on a cyber tit.

Weaving explained the film's background. "You can travel in and out of the Matrix through the people who are in the Matrix. They're kind of entrance points. [Agent Smith is] there to track down rebellious characters like Neo and Morpheus. People who are trying to wake everyone out of their slavery."

The Wachowskis have filtered their vision of the future through the idiom of Hong Kong kung-fu films, and Weaving is enjoying playing a villain.

"There's a lot of kung-fu," he said. "A lot of punching, headbutting and shooting."

The Aussie actor had no prior experience in action films, and appreciated the preparation he was given during a three-month training period. "The fights were originally going to be at the head of the schedule," he related, "but due to injury they had to be put back which has meant we've had to keep up with our training."

"Fantastic," is how Weaving described working with the Wachowskis. "Really wonderful," he said. "They work very well as a team, and are incredibly well prepared. They storyboarded it, yet they don't seem to pre-plan all that."

"Plus I like their sense of humor. If you met them in the street, you wouldn't think they were directors."

Weaving found amusement, too, in his role as Agent Smith. "He's a seemingly indestructible character without feeling who becomes more and more passionate and angry because he has to stay within the Matrix in order to catch these people and he doesn't like it. He starts to smell them because they're human beings. He starts to be more like them and he doesn't like feeling emotion. He starts

HUGO WEAVING, AGENT SMITH

“Smith’s a seemingly indestructible character without feeling who has to stay within the Matrix to catch the rebels and doesn’t like it. He starts to smell them, because they’re human.”

to have ideas and philosophies about things. It’s a funny kind of amusing journey for him.”

Weaving’s lack of experience kept him from being intimidated by the thought of all the action that would be required of him; however, after the first day of shooting, he found his notions about action filmmaking shattered. “These fights are very difficult, they’re time consuming, they’re very painful and yet you still laugh through them. You have to,” Weaving said, almost as if to reassure himself.

Perhaps Weaving’s greatest difficulty was not to make kung-fu noises while performing the role. “You’re always going, ‘who, ha, ho!’” he said with a laugh, “and I get pulled up, and they say, ‘Hugo, you’re going to have to do it again. You’ve been going ‘who ha, ho’ again.”

On the set, Weaving had bandages on his hands. “They’re all bleeding,” he explained. “Keanu is wearing a pad for protecting his chest. I had to punch him in the chest, and he had to fly back and smash into a wall which collapsed.

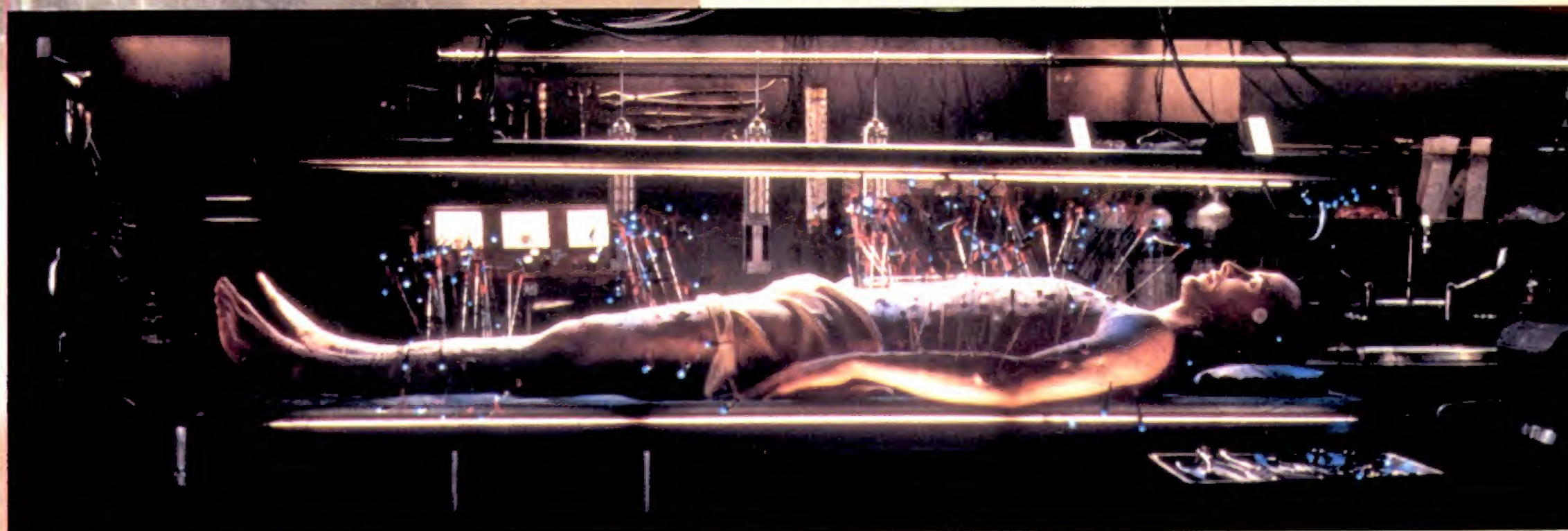
That’s how powerful Agent Smith is. His padding ripped open my knuckles.”

Another major character in THE MATRIX is Cypher, played by Joe Pantoliano, the accomplished character actor who has been in everything from EMPIRE OF THE SUN to RISKY BUSINESS. Pantoliano walked away with the Wachowski brothers’ BOUND, and he brings the same nervous energy to THE MATRIX.

As Pantoliano sees it, “Cypher is a survivor. He’s a guy who’s been a part of this master plan of Morpheus’s for almost 15 years, and I think was a real believer in what he was doing in the beginning. I wanted to be like him, to emulate him. I probably had hopes of being the One. Seeing these guys dying one after the other, I realize it’s not such a great job after all. At this point in his life he’s think-



The film’s startling imagery sprung from the Wachowskis’ collaboration with comic book artist Geof Darrow. Below: Rescued and hooked up to the halfway house of Morpheus’ lab. Above: Production design of THE MATRIX cocoons.



MATRIX

KEANU REEVES

The star on why his Neo is no Johnny Mnemonic.

By Frederick C. Szegin

The last time reluctant action hero Keanu Reeves took on a high tech future, the lackluster JOHNNY MNEMONIC was the result. Apparently not one to say never again, Reeves took on virtual reality once more in the Larry and Andrew Wachowski's follow-up to their well-received drama, BOUND. In THE MATRIX Reeves is Thomas Anderson, a man who is suspicious of the late-twentieth century world around. He tries to undo the alienation he feels by searching for the answer to a single question: what is the Matrix? Once he finds that answer, he believes he may fit into the world after all. But what that answer will do is totally uproot his world, show it for the computer-generated lie that it is, and replace Thomas Anderson with the guise of Neo, a computer-hacking terrorist in a world run by evil supercomputers kept on

their toes by the infamous Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburn).

To be able to fight the good fight, Neo has kung-fu abilities downloaded into him, which enables the filmmakers to bring Hong Kong-style action to Western movies. For the cast, though, months of grueling physical training took place under the tutelage of Hong Kong fight master Yuen Wo Ping.

"I guess he's second generation," says Reeves. "His father was one of the original fight choreographers from Hong Kong. The brothers had story boards of fight sequences that they wanted to see with certain punches, kicks and flips. Wo Ping brought in his wire team and worked with the actors, saw what we were good at, what we weren't good at and trained around that. He's a very sweet man. Wo Ping has this wonderful laugh, and he would laugh whenever anyone got punched in the head. It was an honor to



Reeves as Thomas Anderson, reborn as Neo, virtual reality freedom fighter, melding cerebral science fiction with the kineticism of Hong Kong Kung Fu.

me because I'm a fan of his work. It was great training with him, to be exposed to their techniques and styles of fighting."

Reeves is quick to point out that for all of the hardcore action and high flying butt kicking, THE MATRIX has a meaning within all the mayhem.

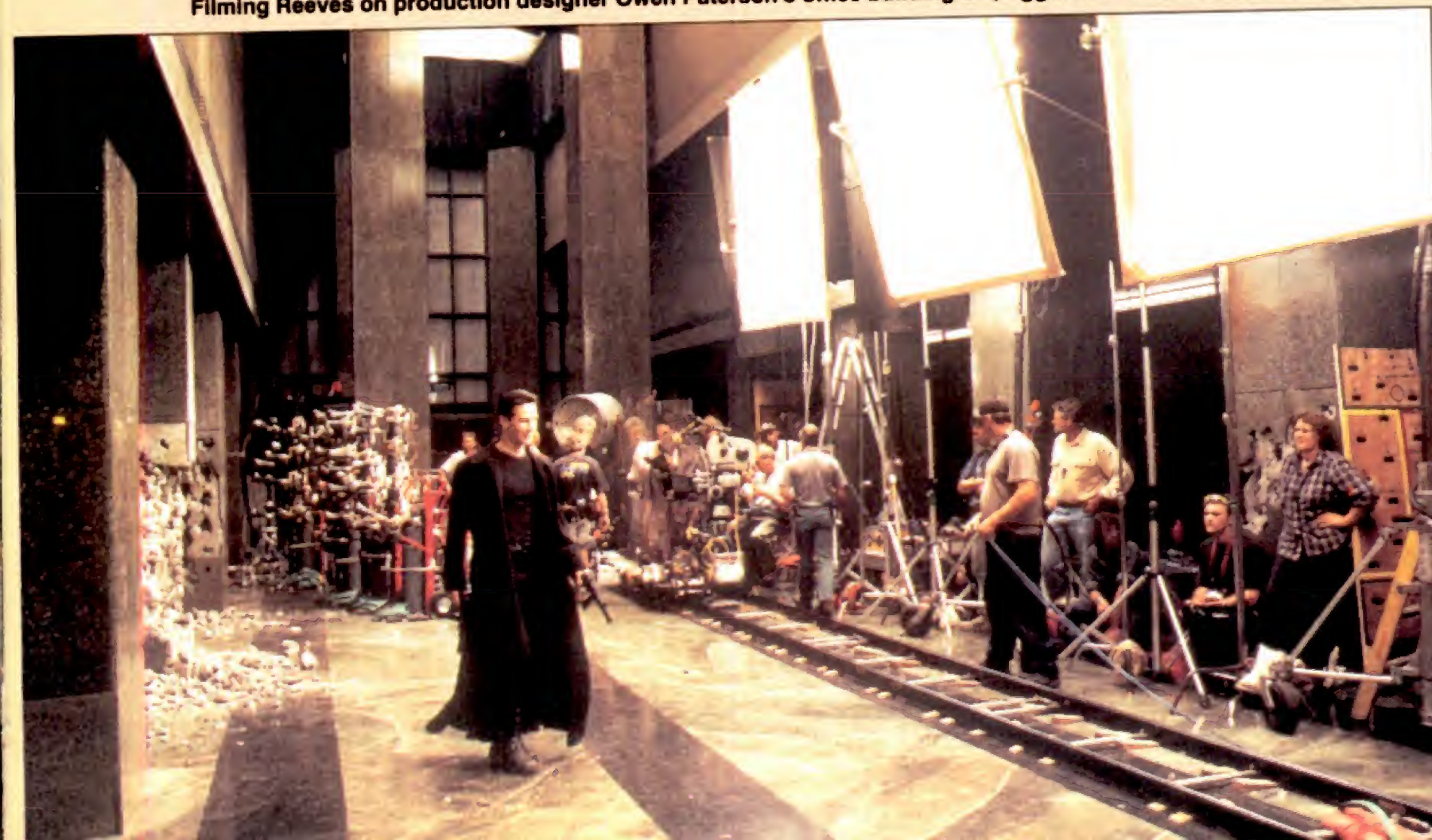
"One of the themes in the film is about losing one's individuality in a group or commu-

nity. That tickled my fancy. There is also the thought of what is truth, what is simulated? It's about the quest for truth and compassion and protecting oneself, or deciding when does one give oneself over to the exterior world. It's fighting for individuality against systems, against sameness, against control. One of the things about this script is that the brothers, Larry and Andrew, are very sensible people. They are just good people, and the film has such a good heart."

Within that heart is the explosive action best suited to comic books as the main characters fight, flip and fly in the faux reality the Matrix has created for them.

"I see some of the framing of Frank Miller," Reeves said. "There's a lot of perspective influence from Miller as well as Japanese angles and perspectives. I know what the brothers are talking about, and I can see it. The trick is to give it the heart and soul they want, giving flesh to a cartoon, soul to a machine. That's what acting in films like this can be sometimes. It's like synthesizing evolution." □

Filming Reeves on production designer Owen Paterson's office building set, rigged for virtual reality demolition.



ing, 'Fuck this. I'm sick and tired of following this guy's pipe dream and putting myself in danger. The Matrix is a lot better place to be than living in the Neb, being cold all the time and knowing that the sun has died and knowing that it can never go back to how it was.'"

Pantoliano is very enthusiastic about working with the Wachowskis again. "They're innovative," he said. "If it wasn't written by them, I wouldn't have done it. There's something about these guys with the millennium approaching, the end of a century of filmmaking. What they're doing has not been done, taking different genres and mixing them all together."

Cypher is the film's Judas, the one who betrays the others, because he decides that a virtual reality fantasy is better than coping with the grim truths that Morpheus has exposed him to. Explained Pantoliano, "In the beginning he believes in all this stuff and then he makes a deal with the devil and sells his soul for that bag of gold."

In the Wachowski script Cypher rationalizes his betrayal this way: "They're going to insert my body. I'll go back to sleep and when I wake up, I'll be fat and rich and I won't remember a goddamn thing. It's the American dream."

Pantoliano admitted that when he read the script, he couldn't really understand it. "I read it five times and I didn't get it. I had executives from Warner Brothers calling me up saying, 'Are you gonna do it?' I said, 'Yeah.' This is the guys from Warner Brothers, 'Do you know what it's about?' I said, 'I don't really get it.' They said, 'We don't either.' I said, 'You're giving them \$70 million dollars to do it! It's just like you guys.'"

For some, a comfortable fantasy is preferable to a horrific reality, and so it is with Pantoliano's character. For him, Pantoliano noted, "The Matrix is real. Trinity tells him, 'The Matrix is not real, Cypher,' and I say, 'Oh, yes, it is. It's realer than this place [the desolate Earth]."

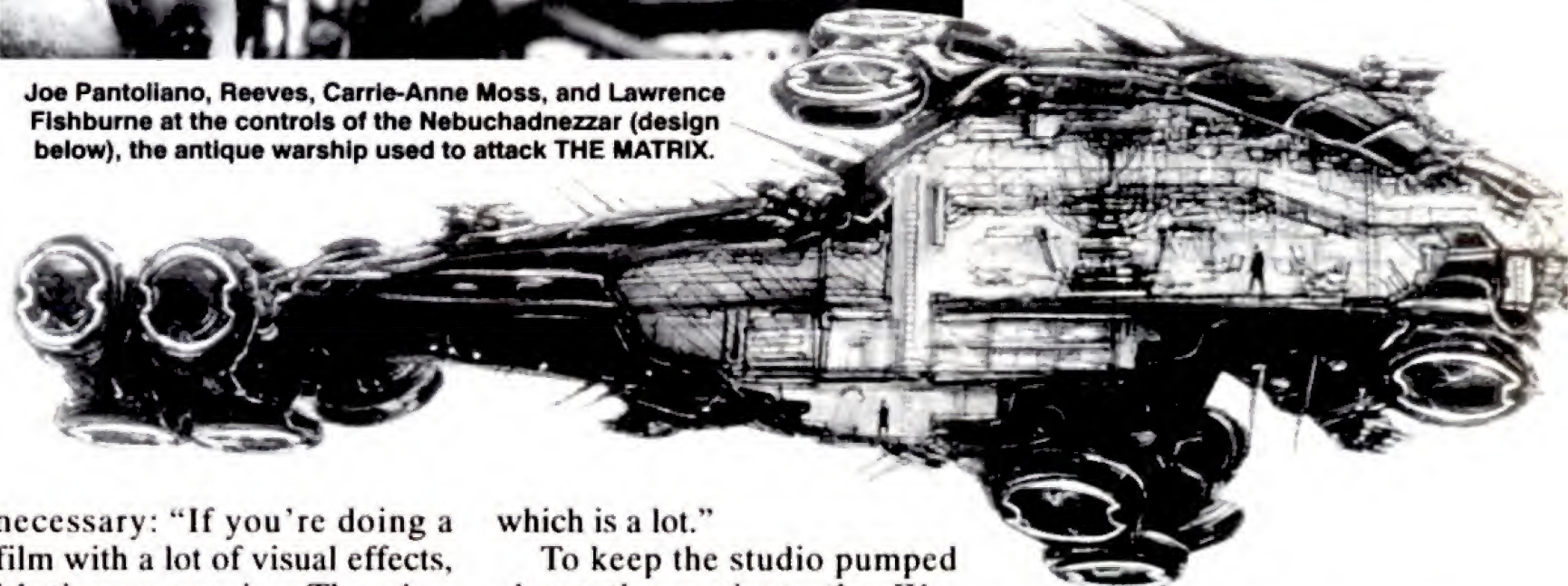
THE MATRIX had, by modern standards, a very long shooting schedule. Producer Barrie Osborne explained why this was

JOE PANTOLIANO, CYPHER

"I read the script five times and I didn't get it. Executives from Warner Bros. called up, saying, 'Do you know what it's about?' I said, 'Not really.' They said, 'We don't either.'"



Joe Pantoliano, Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Lawrence Fishburne at the controls of the Nebuchadnezzar (design below), the antique warship used to attack THE MATRIX.



necessary: "If you're doing a film with a lot of visual effects, it's time consuming. The wire-work is also time consuming. Visual effects and the nature of the shots, the stylization of the movie, cuts down on the number of set-ups you can get done each day. If you're doing a lot of high speed photography it requires a lot of lights and a lot of set-up time for that."

Hong Kong-style action takes time. For example, fight choreographer Yuen Wo Ping (see sidebar, page 26) worked with Jackie Chan for two months on a fight sequence in DRUNKEN MASTER 2 that lasts only 16 minutes on film. However, Osborne noted, "Wo Ping is actually quite quick, but there are lots of cuts, and we're using the actors to do lots of their own stunt work. Because they've invested so much time, they really want to get it right. We could go 20 takes on a shot,

which is a lot."

To keep the studio pumped about the project, the Wachowskis had an eight-minute opening sequence sent back to Warner Bros. to give them a feel for the visual scale of the project. THE MATRIX utilizes a large scale canvas, encompassing many large sets. "We see a massive amount of destruction almost being pushed to the point of being cartoon," said Osborne. The physical effects are being handled by Australians Steve Cortly and Brian Cox.

To get more bang for their buck, the production turned to Owen Paterson to be the project's production designer. Paterson created the look of both the virtual reality and actual future, blending actual Sydney structures with sets and artificial backdrops.

"There were initial concepts that we took into consideration, a lot of other illustrations were

done based on those," explained Paterson. "There was a generic idea for a [computer interface] chair which we've tried to adhere to quite closely, but for physical reasons, it's had to change to make it do what it actually needs to do. It also changed, to some degree due to artistic proportion, fitting it into a real space as opposed to a drawing on a page."

"But it's adapting some things and totally starting some things from scratch. The same would apply to the power plant. Everything within the Matrix has been drawn or illustrated from scratch. Everything in the real world has been based on concepts that came from [comic book artist] Geof Darrow and the brothers [Wachowski]."

The Wachowski brothers had a definite design in mind for the film. As Paterson explained, "Their background had intro-

duced them to a number of artists they'd worked with previously. They particularly liked the work of Geof Darrow, who's a cartoonist they know very well. He did a lot of work for them originally, creating a mechanical look for the real world.

"Now bear in mind that the Matrix has taken on a look that's based around reality. We like to think that the sets look like locations and the locations look like sets, in a way. We've based a lot of our designs on general or specific concepts that Darrow has worked out and then we've sort of developed them into physical shapes. We've tried to work everything in the real world, the machine world, from the mechanics of our world, from the early parts of the twentieth century and maybe a little later on."

MATRIX

THE WACHOWSKI BROS.

The auteur directors of BOUND on filmmaking for the new millenium.

w“It’s not so much futuristic, but there’s sort of a pseudo-retro feeling about a lot of what we’ve used. We’ve used a lot of massive sand castings to build the basis of our ecto chairs, which is the mechanism that allows us to go from the real world into a computer. In addition to that, within the machine world, things like automotive components, exhaust pipes, and carburetors have become very strong design motifs which we’ve tried to emulate in bigger scales.”

For Paterson, THE MATRIX presented a number of design challenges. To give the sets the look of a location, a vast cyclorama was created that reproduced the Sydney skyline, with extra buildings added to give perspective. Looking out office building windows on the set gives the impression of being several stories off the ground.

To create the enormous cityscape cyclorama, a photographer captured the Sydney skyline with nine 8x10 cameras shooting simultaneously from one camera platform. “It’s about 200 degrees of vision,” said Paterson. “It’s approximately 40 feet high and two hundred feet long. Once they’ve taken those photographs they digitize the whole thing. They then form the negative as one large digital file. An enlarger processes it onto one of Ko-

Defending THE MATRIX, Australian Hugo Weaving as the relentless cyberassassin Agent Smith.



By Mitch Persons

Interviewing film *auteurs* Andy and Larry Wachowski is something akin to accidentally running across Judge Joseph F. Crater. As any decent Urban Legend follower knows, Crater, a New York Supreme Court associate justice, drove off in a taxicab in midtown Manhattan on the evening of August 6, 1930, and proceeded to disappear without a trace. Unlike Crater, though, the brothers Wachowski, the writer/directors of the *noir* hit BOUND, are still very much in evidence in this world. They are notoriously shy of interviews, however, and have proved to be almost as difficult to track down as Crater himself.

But the clout of Warner Bros., the company that is producing MATRIX, the Wachowski’s latest directing and writing effort, prevailed in arranging an interview. The bassoon-voiced Larry Wachowski, the spokesperson of the duo, and his quieter brother, Andy, seemed reluctant to give out too much information about their new film. The initial responses were decidedly guarded. When Larry was asked if THE MATRIX was a change from BOUND, he answered with a curt “Nope.” When pressed for more information, both men opened up a bit, and soon the dialogue flowed fairly easily.

“THE MATRIX,” boomed Larry, “does have its basic roots in BOUND. The new film has kind of a *noir*-y edge, although strictly speaking, it’s not a *noir* film. It is *noir* in terms of its dark viewpoint, dark characters.



Andy and Larry Wachowski, screenwriters-turned-directors to protect their vision, melding martial arts action with sci-fi scope.

Andy and I like nights. We like shadowy environments, shadowy people, that sort of stuff. At the beginning of this film there’s no obvious good guy, no obviously bad guy, and that in itself is a very common *noir*-type scenario. So I guess when somebody asks if THE MATRIX is different than BOUND, we’d have to say in essence, it isn’t.”

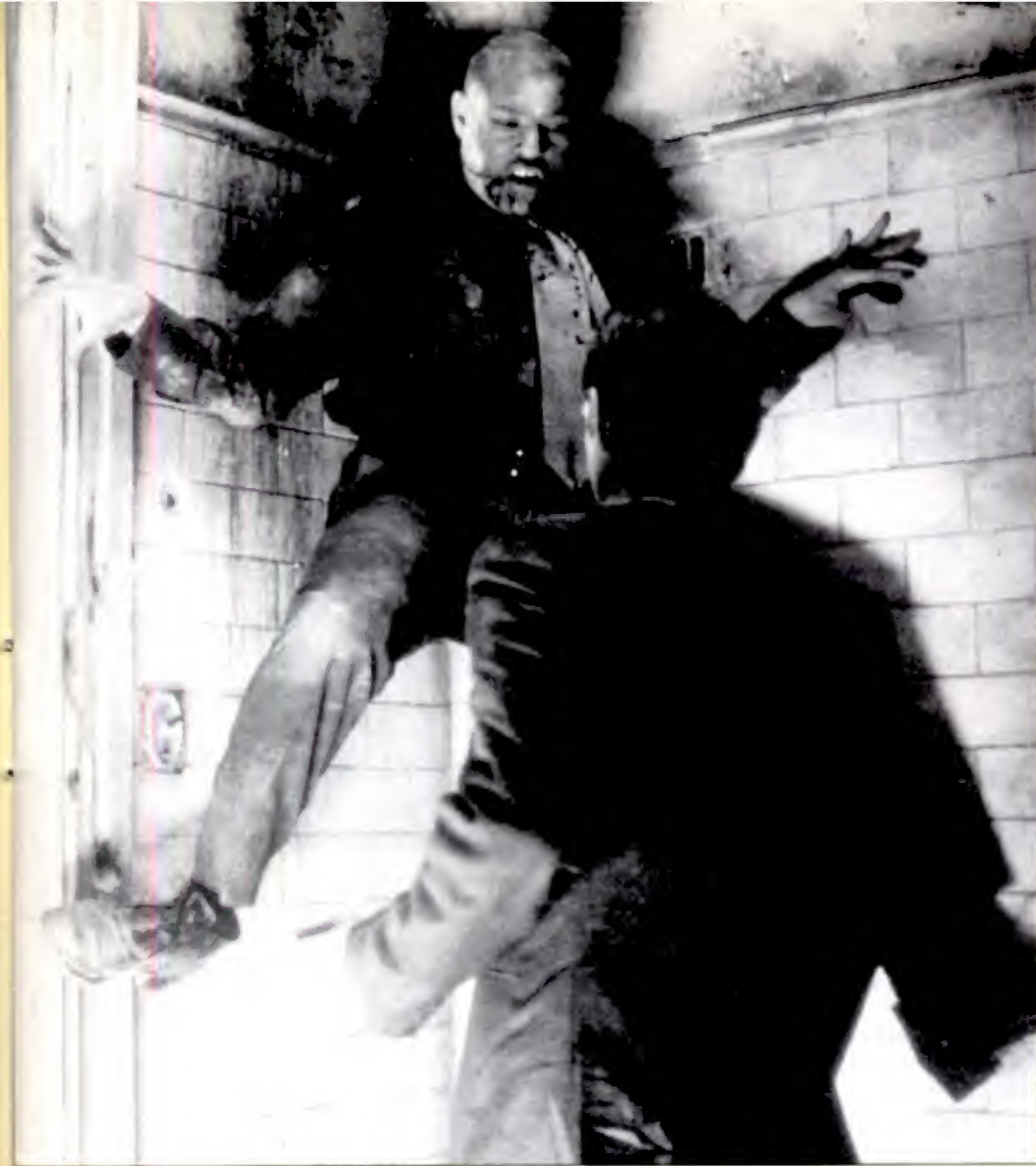
But THE MATRIX is a big-budget film, with gobs of special effects and a great deal of Hong Kong-type violence. By contrast, BOUND was an intimate suspense yarn revolving around three characters, the main action shifting back and forth between two adjoining apartments. “Because of the small-scale nature of the film,” noted Larry, “people assumed BOUND must have been our first effort. It wasn’t. It is true that BOUND was our first directing job, but before that we

had written ASSASSINS, and had been writing THE MATRIX on and off for five years. In actuality, we had sold THE MATRIX to our producer, Joel Silver, long before BOUND ever saw any screen time.”

“Nobody really understood THE MATRIX,” added Andy. “We would turn the script in, and people would have no idea what it was about, and we would try to explain it, and all we would get would be a ‘Huh?’ The only ones who seemed to be aware of what was going on were Joel and later on, Keanu Reeves.”

“The film,” interjected Larry, “was difficult to grasp for some because one of the more intellectual ideas is that it’s sort of a journey of consciousness. Early on we reference *Alice in Wonderland* because that was a great, brilliant story in terms of a child-like consciousness being confronted with a world in which a kid came into that world. All these rules were put onto this kid, and a lot of them she didn’t understand. Children are told to do things and there’s no reason, at least from the child’s standpoint, to do them, and things don’t make a whole lot of sense. Eventually, the consciousness of the child evolves. We tried to do a similar thing where Neo’s journey is an evolution of his consciousness towards a higher consciousness.

“Our goal in THE MATRIX was to make an intellectual action movie. We tried to push the action film a little bit further than it usually goes, just as in BOUND we tried to push the *film noir* genre a little bit beyond what was expected.



In a seedier corner of THE MATRIX, freedom fighter Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) gets trapped by the relentless Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving).

LARRY WACHOWSKI, FILMMAKER

“The whole concept of computer simulations seeping into the present consciousness is a millennium phenomenon—a natural thing for people to explore at this place in time.”

“Even in styling the physical world of THE MATRIX, we tried to get it to go the extra yard. We knew the wilder elements of sci-fi, the puttied creatures, the jetcars streaming across the screen in blazes of fiery exhaust. We took those elements, and then slammed them in the opposite direction. The entire effect of the film is one of hyper-reality.”

“We come out of the comic book world,” said Andy, “and one of our inspirations was the work of a comic book artist named Geoff Darrow. Geoff did a piece called ‘Hardboiled,’ which was gritty and naturalistic. We brought him on to do most of our conceptual work in terms of how we wanted the future world to look, and how we wanted our creatures to look...”

“And also,” piped up Larry, “we were getting pretty bored with the way most technology works in science fiction and we wanted things to have this kind of nuts-and-bolts look where everything is made of metal, real heavy duty and functional-looking...”

“And industrial,” interjected Larry.

“And industrial, rather than plastic-y and slick, and smooth

and clean. That was the starting point for this future world. Then we were going to photograph it, and be very conscious of color, and kind of high contrast, making it very stylistic.

“Everything in THE MATRIX has a stylized quality. For the fight scenes, we chose fight director Wo Ping, who had choreographed a film both Andy and I admired, FISTS OF LEGEND. We chose Wo over the many other fight directors who are out there because he is very good at creating stories inside the actual fight. While some of the moves aren’t classically flashy in some respects, the story beat, and the flow of the action is just the type of almost balletic Hong Kong fighting we were looking for.

“Wo was the choreographer, but we were the ones who were in complete and utter control at all times. Wo did the whole first pass with his team of stunt men. He positioned the camera where he thought it should be—Hong Kong choreographers always pick out the camera angles—and then Andy and I would look at them. Some of them we liked, some of them we didn’t like. I think one of the things that makes Hong Kong movies look

like Hong Kong movies is there is so much hand-held action that it loses a little bit, I think, of the elegance, the grace. Many times Wo’s shots just didn’t meet our criteria, so we added moving camera shots, dollies, stuff like that around sections that we wanted.”

“It’s sort of funny,” laughed Andy, “but in Hong Kong films you cannot get away from the medium profile angle. That’s like *the* angle of choice, because it’s so real. It’s like right there, it’s really happening. We would be picking out a camera setup, and Wo would look over and go, ‘No, no, no! Wide angle, wide angle!’”

“There were many times,” continued Larry, “when we let Wo have his way; he is, after all, an undisputed expert in his field. One thing that Andy and I were very hardcore about was having the actual actors do the fighting. We didn’t want a lot of double work. We believed that all of the energy in the fights would be strengthened by the fact that it would actually be Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishburne duking it out with the bad guys.

“Now, one of our stars—I won’t say who—had never had any kung-fu training. There was a certain curve that we had to deal with in terms of having to be able to teach this person. We were limited to a certain extent. Some of the moves the actor had to execute were very complicated. For the most part, though, when it looks like Keanu and Laurence, and our other stars, Hugo Weaving and Carrie-Ann Moss, are engaged in physical collisions with the enemy, they actually are.”

On-screen collisions may not be the only ones the principals of THE MATRIX have to face. On the same day that THE MATRIX opens on April 23, David Cronenberg is debuting his similarly-themed film, *eXistenZ*.

“Yes, we know about that,”

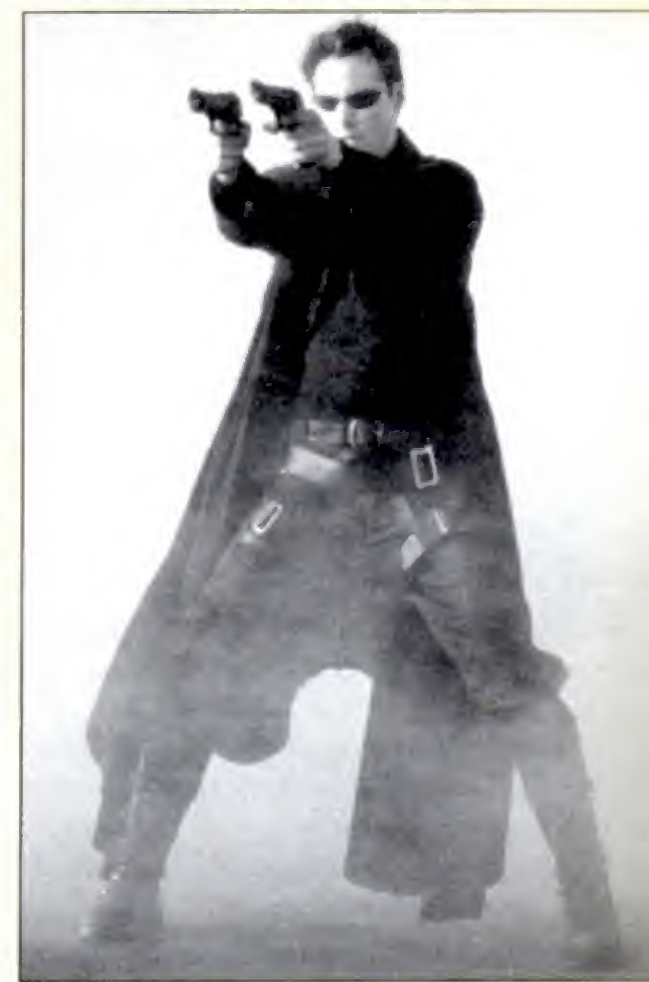
declared Andy, “and to be perfectly honest, I can’t wait to see it.”

“Me too,” agreed Larry. “We’re both big fans of his.”

“From what I’ve heard,” Andy continued, “David’s film and ours aren’t going to be that similar, they’re just going to have similar basic ideas. David’s style is very different than ours, and we have kung-fu in THE MATRIX whereas *eXistenZ* doesn’t.”

“Very true, Andy, but you know that ideas are universal. I think the whole concept, that of computer simulations seeping into the present consciousness, is prevalent in a lot of work right now. I see it as kind of a millennium phenomenon—a natural thing for people to be exploring at this place in time. And it’s everywhere: it’s in THE TRUMAN SHOW, it’s in DARK CITY, it’s all over. THE MATRIX isn’t the first movie to address this subject, and I know it won’t be the last. It’s a very important modern topic.” □

Keanu Reeves as Neo, among the few who understood the cyber-reality of the Wachowskis’ complex script.



dak's digital films called Digi-film. It's then all literally celotaped together and flown out here and stretched together.

"One of the great arts of doing a translight this size is the physical joining of all the pieces together. There are approximately 80 sections to it. Close up you can obviously see the joins, but once it's rear illuminated—there's lots of lights behind it on scaffolding, great big flat dish-like lights—they'll create a general soft illumination to it." The rear illuminated translight can be specifically lit for a daytime or nighttime shot.

The translight was shipped in one piece because it was assembled in the States. "We can do translights here but nothing has ever been done that's as big as this one," commented Paterson. "They roll it up in a big cardboard tube. The whole thing goes into a box and is slipped into a jumbo jet and flown out here. It couldn't get any higher because we were at the limits of what can fit in a jumbo jet."

A mock helicopter was built for the rescue scene which is lowered on wires and can move in and hover around. "It's a mock-up like everything else in the film and we've had to actually build this thing from scratch, which is a big job in itself," recalled Paterson. "We got parts from a real helicopter and

Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishburne amid the devastation of the real world outside THE MATRIX.



MATRIX

SUPERHEROINE

Carrie-Anne Moss on playing Trinity, a high-kicker with Peel potential.

By Dennis Fischer

Neo: "Trinity? The Trinity? The Trinity that cracked the I.R.S. Kansas City D-Base? . . . I thought you were a guy."

Trinity: "Most guys do."

Once relegated to being endangered victims or the hero's prize, women more and more are demonstrating in action movies that they can hold their own with their male counterparts. But the Emma Peels of this world are few and far between.

Carrie-Anne Moss, who stars as Trinity in THE MATRIX, has Peel potential. An ability to kick butt did not come naturally to the Vancouver-born actress, best known for her role on MODELS INC., as well as such features as SABOTAGE and THE SECRET LIFE OF ALGERNON. Part of the commitment in taking the MATRIX role meant that Moss not only had the challenge of remaining slim enough to fit into her tightly form-fitting costume, but she also had to undergo several months of movie-style kung fu training under the direction of ace Hong Kong fight choreographer Yuen Wo Ping. Her reaction?

"It's been so great!" said Moss with a weary, winning smile. "Hard and challenging and so worth all of the training in the end. I've been training for this movie for almost eight months. In the beginning it was really, really hard."

Moss began preparing for the role by training every day from nine to four with an hour



Moss as Trinity, watching over Reeves as he's injected back into the cyberspace of THE MATRIX to save mankind from stagnation.

off for lunch. "We started off with stretching because the foundation for the kung fu is to be really, really open," she said. "We'd stretch for a good hour and a half and then we started kicking and learning different styles of kicking. Then progressing into different choreographed fights."

"I would then spend the rest of the afternoon working on the wire because a lot of my kung fu is airborne. I started off learning how it felt on the wire and doing simple things, gradually building up to some pretty intense wire stuff like you'll see in the movie. I run sideways along the wall and do cartwheels off the wall. Pretty outrageous stuff."

If Moss has a shortcoming, she said, it's that "I'm pretty brutal because I don't have a great concept of holding back.

For me to kick or punch with power I have to make contact. What's so fascinating about the Hong Kong films is their power—they don't [actually] touch. The guys who are training us are the most incredible guys. Most of them don't even speak English. They just show you and if you have a question you go to the interpreter."

Still, the work remains rough, and Moss admitted that she has been sore from the beginning. "My hips hurt a lot. I sprained an ankle during shooting, all things that I was still able to work with. I'm still paying for the ankle. I don't think I'll get over that until it's all over."

Moss finds that her strength does not conflict with her feminine side. Regarding Trinity, she said, "I find her pretty interesting because as strong as I am, I'm still pretty feminine. And I like that."

Moss has no trouble conveying both aspects of her character. "I think it's who I am," Moss said. "I didn't play being tough. I didn't have to prove I was tough. She does what she has to do. She's not cold. She's not bitchy. She's a woman who's fighting for something she believes in and will do whatever she has to do to do it."

"The key for me is the idea that I didn't want to play it as being a really tough chick. I don't need to be because it's there already. I'm running on walls and I'm kicking ass."

Moss had no special inside track to win the part. "I don't think they knew anything about me when I got the job," she

CARRIE-ANNE MOSS, TRINITY

“I didn’t play being tough. I didn’t have to prove I was tough. She’s not bitchy. She’s a woman who’s fighting for something she believes in and will do whatever she has to do.”



Lean and mean: not since Diana Rigg’s Avenger Emma Peel has an ability to kick butt been so stylishly embodied. Moss had to train for several months.

said. “I read for it three times and the screen test went for three days. The first day was with a group of kung fu guys. Not our guys, but others. It was a three-hour session and they taught me moves and it was just how quickly you can catch on. It was really hard. It was intense. I read with Keanu the next day and it took a couple of weeks then to find out that I’d got it.”

Moss found the strength of Trinity very appealing. “I loved the fact that she was so strong. And I was drawn to the brothers. I loved their style [she is a fan of their first directorial effort, *BOUND*, which like *THE MATRIX*, they also wrote] and I liked them immediately. Stylistically they’re such fascinat-

ing filmmakers. They tell a story beautifully and interestingly. I also liked Keanu and it looked great.”

Trinity is a very dedicated, driven individual who has had to put her concerns above considerations of love and romance. As a character, Moss said, Trinity is “pretty consistent. The one thing that changes is she gets pretty honest about the feelings she has for this man.

“I don’t want to give too much away, I’m not sure how much I can tell you. The place that I do change or grow from beginning to end is from this warrior mode that my character’s in, where there’s not a lot of time to love or to have feelings. Near the end I get to em-

brace that a bit.”

Another aspect that retains Moss’ feminine side is her costume. “The woman who has designed our wardrobe is called Kym Barret,” Moss explained, “and she’s become a very good friend of mine. She’s done *ROMEO AND JULIET* before this and she’s just phenomenal.

“I have two looks, because part of the movie takes place in the Matrix, and part of it takes place on [the Nebuchadnezzar], the ship that we live in. In the Matrix I wear sort of a very tight black PVC outfit. It’s made by our seamstress, who made it for dancers.”

Moss does not have a fascination for genre films. However, she says, “I’m always pleasantly entertained by films I go to of that genre. I love love stories, but I’m always thrilled when I see a good science fiction movie. I’m just a huge movie buff.”

Moss noted that being able to do the demanding stunts required by *THE MATRIX* has been “one of my greatest accomplishments. If I look at a script and find out it’s training, I don’t know whether I’d ever have to train again. This is about as intense as it gets. I’ve never heard of actors training

for almost a year and keep training for the whole movie.”

Still, tiring as it is, Moss avoided resting between shots. “I try not to rest too much because I get a lot of energy from people. I turn my music on and do dancing. I’ve taken a few naps but find it really hard to get back up so I try and keep the energy levels up.”

The film’s fight scenes might require as many as ten or 15 different techniques, demanding intense concentration, but Moss is a dedicated professional who keeps on going until her performance is judged to be just right. So far, she is very happy with the results that she has seen.

For Moss, working on the movie has been character-building. “I’ve learned so much personal stuff about myself,” she said. “I like the sense of humor of Hong Kong movies and the sense of humor of our wire team. I just love them.”

Looking back on making *MATRIX*, Moss said, “It’ll be the greatest experience of my life. I can’t imagine that any other movie would compare to this experience. It’s not [just] the end result I’m thinking of, it’s the year I spent with all these great people. It’s been incredible.” □

Moss as Trinity, disabling a *MATRIX* security guard with ease. Learning to do her own stunts made the film “the greatest experience of my life,” she said.



we molded that and then built a substructure out of steel and then all the instrumentation, joy stick, and gears have been manufactured as well."

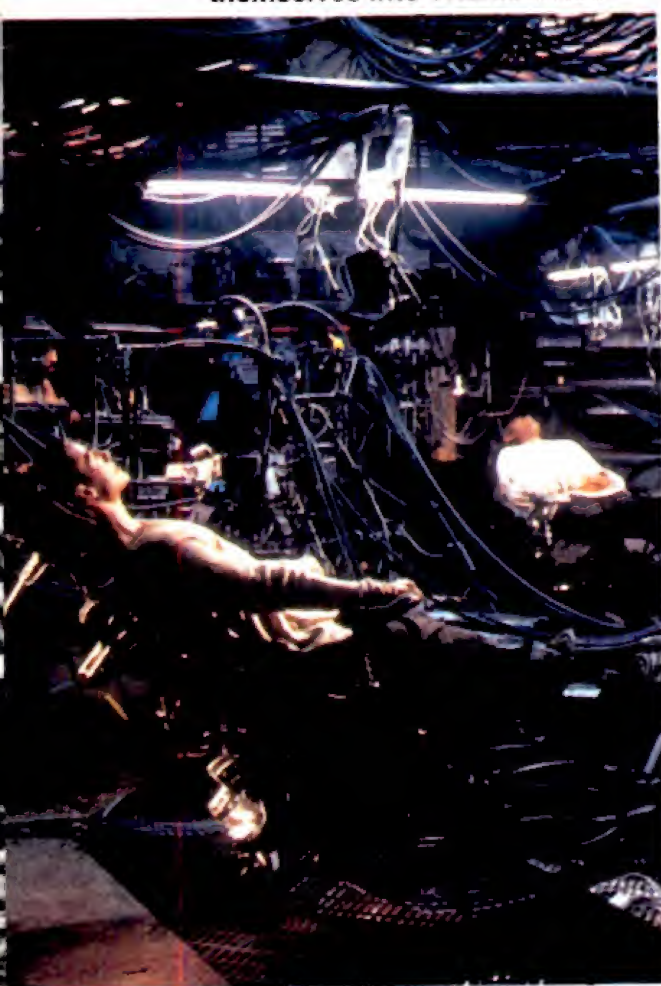
Paterson decided that in the end, the most efficient and effective way to shoot the movie was to try to film it as much for real as possible, using on-set practical effects. "We took a real building and we took a section out of it and built it for real right down to the steel so it looks like an old skyscraper," he explained. "And then we'll build our set, our component into it. We can float a wall [i.e. remove it for filming purposes]. We can remove all the sides. We can float the ceiling pieces."

When the helicopter shoots out windows and walls, behind the walls—made to look concrete—are panels which are inserted with bullet hits in them that can be synchronized to the firing of a machine gun.

Wild walls are nothing new to filmmaking, but filming them a couple stories in the air does add a new level of difficulty, so that the crew was often 20 feet in the air on a fairly large scaffolding rig on which the grips and the gaffers and the directors were able to work. "Once the windows have been shot out, the room is about 35 to 40 foot deep. We add another 20 foot on scaffold to work on."

To disrupt the virtual reality

Reeves and Fishburne, plugged-in to computer interface chairs to inject themselves into THE MATRIX.



MATRIX

BULLET TIME

FX chief Yannak Sirrs on making time stand still, and other mindblowers.

By Dennis Fischer

According to Yannak Sirrs, the digital effects supervisor for Mannix effects, the effects of THE MATRIX run the whole gamut, ranging from very intensive artificial environments to more straight forward compositing work. "We've got bullet time, which is extended slow motion if you like, which has made it into some commercials now, but what you'll see here is a very ambitious version of it."

Sirrs is a member of the Mannix effects team, whose most recent work was on the Coen Brothers' film THE BIG LIEBOWSKI, for which he did the memorable fantasy sequences of a Jeff Bridges-Busby Berkeley-Bowling fantasy. Sirrs has also worked on such recent films as ARMAGEDDON to 6 DAYS 7 NIGHTS.

Sirrs explained the film's bullet time: "I'm doing moves that've never been seen before: slowing time down to a standstill. Real world events go off like explosions, splashes and we freeze the action and move the camera out what would be an impossibly fast speed to another vantage point and continue the action on from that point."

Bullet time, so-called because the camera seems to travel as rapidly as a bullet as well as because it allows Keanu Reeves as Neo to move fast enough to evade a bullet, is created using multiple cameras which shoot a scene at carefully spaced intervals simultaneously. According to Sirrs, the effect is used about a half dozen times in



Keanu Reeves in a hall of bullets and debris in one of the film's super slow-motion effects sequences, dubbed "bullet time."

the film and is achieved with "a combination of many, many still cameras in a dedicated rig set-up, which involves about 120 still cameras all electronically controlled to fire in a particular sequence.

"By varying that sequence we can then decide how to slow time down, whether to freeze a moment in time or whether we want ultraslow motion, or whether we want to go from slow motion to a frozen moment and then speed up again at the end of it. It all depends on how the cameras fire, if they all fire at the same time—it's frozen. The further apart they fire, the faster the action will be."

The cameras employed are simple SLR (single lens reflex) cameras that are specially sequenced and rigged. When the

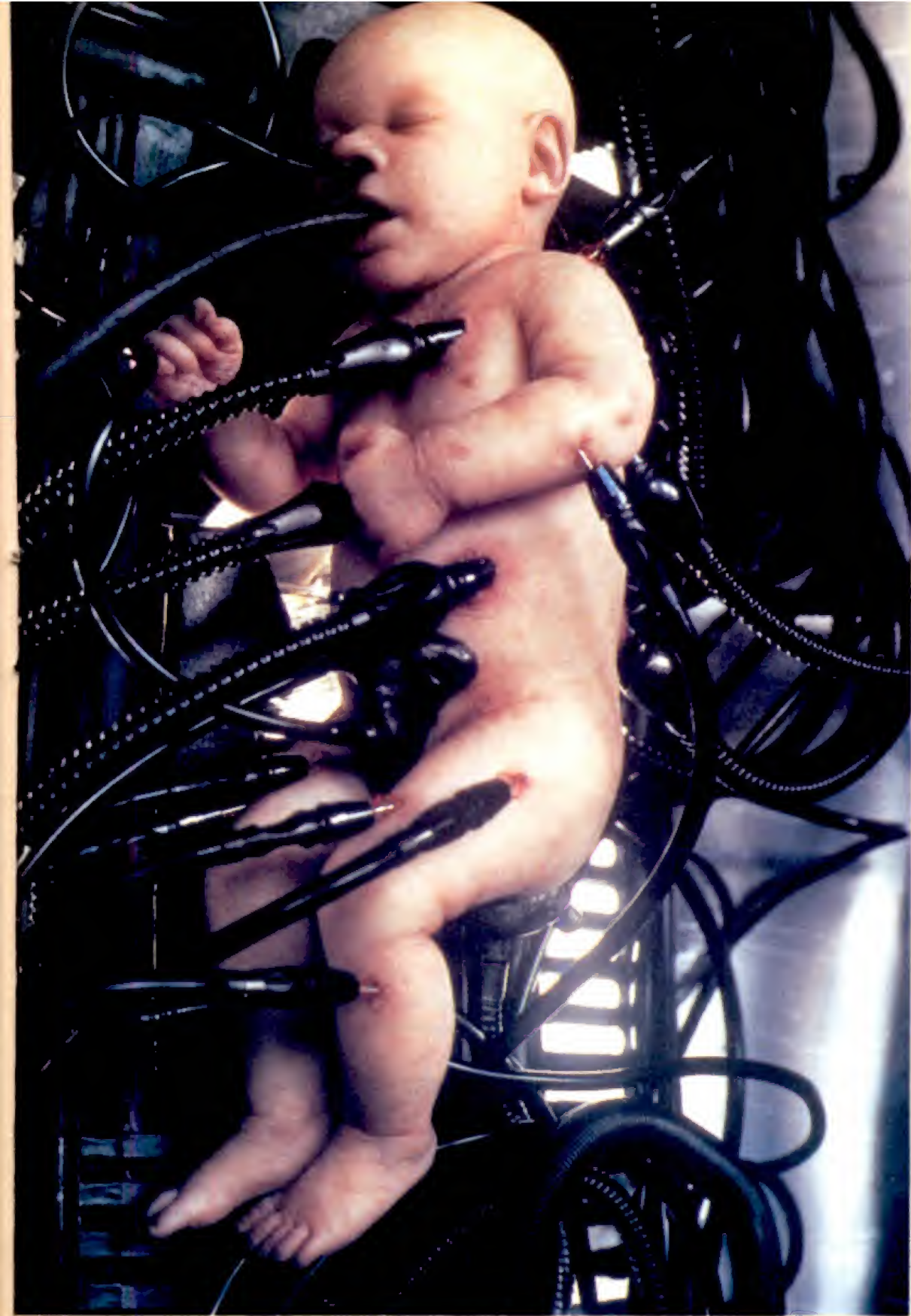
processed film is cut together, combining dozens of frames, it gives the movement a unique and unreal quality.

Noted Sirrs, "There's an underlying theme to the movie of an artificial environment. One of the premises of the movie hangs around the fact that one character has the ability to take control of his environment. So this is a hint that [he has] the ability to perceive the environment in a different way. He has the ability to slow things down and be able to move out of the way of bullets. It's just another way of saying that this isn't quite a real world. This is an artificial construct, which is what the movie's based upon."

THE MATRIX will contain more than 200 special effects shots. Noted Sirrs, "Some are simple. Some are two level composites to ones with ten to 20 elements. There's some full-on CGI stuff, very ambitious."

Sirrs himself started working in effects back in 1987, working for the Computer Company in London, which was one of the first companies involved in digital film work. As Sirrs sees it, "The cutting edge is also a dangerous place to be. Since then all this equipment had made itself available to other facilities. You can go and buy an SGI piece of software. I spent five years in London, moved to LA with the same company, and from there moved on to this project."

Pulling off the bullet time effects has been particularly time consuming as well as technically demanding. "You can link all



YANNAK SIRRS, FX SUPERVISOR

“You have to be careful about overdoing effects. Things like morphing have a certain lifespan before they get tired. Show it to an audience today and they tend to groan.”

biomechanics with the biology being more aquatic than anything else. There are shades of [H. R.] Giger, but there's a more underwater look here. [We're] trying to get that nice translucent quality to objects. There's a lot of time being spent on how to define the look.”

One sequence Sirrs expects that audiences will find particularly spectacular is the harvest of the humans. As he explains it, we see “rows and rows of embryonic people growing off trees being harvested by the robots of the future. This is like a vista effect. The whole landscape is populated by these things. Right from close to camera to off into infinity over the horizon you see all this animation going on. It's quite ambitious.”

According to Sirrs, THE MATRIX has some of the most technically demanding effects he's ever come across. “It's just taking a major new spin on things,” he said. “Every now and again you get the chance to work on a movie where [the effects are in] your face. You can't miss it this time.”

Sirrs' company writes much of their own CGI software. “A lot of the rendering qualities are

custom-programmed to get the particular look they want. Additionally, with the bullet time shots, there's custom software in there to take out the inconsistencies between frames because we've made these still cameras do something they'd not normally be doing.”

Sirrs' task is to bring Owen Paterson's production designs to life. “We're definitely aiming for the ‘wow’ factor. You do have to be careful about overdoing things, though. You look at TERMINATOR 2 and something like morphing, they have a certain lifespan during which you have to get the shots done in before they begin to look tired. Afterwards they do become useful tools but suddenly not this new thing that's so special anymore. Morphing still has its uses today but as a stand alone showcase effect, it hasn't retained that power. Show it to an audience today and they tend to groan. You don't really want to get to that stage with an effect. Get it out there at the optimum time and file it for future reference to get you out of a jam or for some particular case. Not to keep showcasing it again and again and again.” □

Borrowing imagery from H. R. Giger, babies are plugged into THE MATRIX at birth. Left: Filming the pull-back on Reeves' cocoon, using green screen to expand the set off to infinity.

They're created identically, but they're being used for a purpose they're not often used for.”

The bullet time technique was created by a man named Dayton Taylor, who took a strip of film with lenses in front of it, and basically sequenced the exposures on the film. “Since then I think a number of people have come up with rigs,” said Sirrs. “This is certainly the most ambitious one I've seen. I just think it's going a little bit further. The rig is more flexible. If you see this effect used in other places, like commercials, what you generally see is just a limited move. The rig looks like a roller coaster of cameras, very impressive.”

CGI provides the look of the film's future, which Sirrs describes as “a combination of

these still cameras together and you can make them all fire,” said Sirrs, “but each camera is slightly different and we have to account for all these differences. If you undo the quirks of each camera when you put the frames together, then you don't see individual camera signatures whether they be brighter or the image being a slightly different shape. There's no [special] lens on these still cameras.

Setting up the roller coaster formation of the film's “bullet time” slow-motion still cameras, filmed green screen to composite actors and effects in real time.



MATRIX

MARTIAL ARTS

Hong Kong fight master Yuen Wo Ping on exporting Kung Fu.

By Dennis Fischer

Yuen Wo Ping is a man at the top of his craft, that of a Hong Kong stunt choreographer and action director. He would only agree to work with the Wachowskis if they would guarantee that their cast would train long hours to learn kung fu and to learn to work with wires, rather than the rams and pneumatics Hollywood usually uses to project a person through the air at a certain speed.

Wo Ping learned kung-fu from his illustrious father, Yuen Siu Tin, who introduced him to film work in the '60s. He formed his own company in 1979, producing and choreographing Tsai Siu Ming's *BUDDHIST FIST* the following year. He directed his protege Donnie Yen in films such as *TIGER CAGE* and most notably *IRON MONKEY*. He also worked on the fight sequences of Tsui Hark's *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA* and Wong Ching's *LAST HERO IN CHINA*. However, it was his work as fight choreographer on *FIST OF LEGEND* that caught the attention of the Wachowski brothers.

"The difference between making a Hong Kong action movie and a Hollywood action movie is that for the Hong Kong action movie, they are rehearsing on the set," explained Ping. "There is no prior training because [Hong Kong stunt men] all know their actions. With Hollywood action films, the actors have to be trained.

"There's not too many challenges with this movie, only the fact that [we] have to train the actors. Every aspect of their fighting needed attention to make them look real, from their poses to the way they throw punches, so it took a little bit longer than usual."

Part of the actors' training included getting familiar with Hong Kong-style wire work, which allows fighters to make incredible leaps and flips. Noted Wo Ping, "When they train, they do stretches, then fighting, and finish off on the wire." Of all Hollywood actors, the one

Ping looks the most forward to one day working with is Mel Gibson.

When Ping choreographs a fight, he knows what the best camera angles will be. He works out the look of the fight during the time he is designing it. While Hong Kong excels in action movies, the former British possession has shied away from science fiction subjects because it lacks the technology and specialized knowledge available to American filmmakers.

An accomplished action director himself, Ping feels that the Wachowski brothers are "doing a very good job and that they're very serious workers. Their thinking is very close to the Hong Kong directors' way of thinking. They have a feeling for the action films. They have action film sense. American Hollywood movies take a longer time to do, which is better. They have more preparation time, whereas Hong Kong films are very fast-paced."

However, Ping actually prefers Hong Kong films because they're more stressful. He's used to the constant pace. To him, American filmmaking is a lot slower. "You could make four movies in the time it takes to make this one," he observed, "or, if not four, at least three."

As part of their working methods, the Wachowskis adapted their entire script in storyboard and worked together with Ping on the fight sequences. Ping felt comfortable making suggestions for alterations that

Wo Ping oversees his family-run crew during filming on the set in Sydney, Australia, hooking up wires to Reeves that are removed later, digitally.



Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) trains Neo (Keanu Reeves) in the mental discipline to tap into *THE MATRIX*, aerial moves supervised by Wo Ping.

he felt would improve the sequences' pace and excitement. Unlike some Hong Kong films, each character is not given a distinctive fighting style.

One thing Ping did insist on was that the lead actors not only train but keep in good shape. How many hours of exercise a day do the actors have to do to keep themselves in shape? "It depends on each movie," said Ping. "Generally speaking and depending on how much action is required from the actor, then we decide how many hours training. On *THE MATRIX*, they average six hours a day, every day, except for Saturdays and Sundays. This involves fight training and weight training too, though."

In describing the Wachowskis' working methods, Ping said, "The brothers are very much like Hong Kong directors and have Hong Kong sensibilities. I try to cooperate all the way but if I don't think it works for the scene, then I just tell the directors and they work it out, but they all work together.

"In American movies," noted Ping, "they're all storyboarded and they leave little room for inspiration on the set. It's good that everything's organized, but if I have any inspiration on the set, it's only good if the actors can follow. Jet Li and Jackie Chan can follow, but not these actors." They don't have the same background in kung-fu fighting as the Hong Kong box office champs. □

program being fed into Neo's head, Morpheus gives him a blue pill which contains a trace program, allowing the rebels to pinpoint his actual, as opposed to virtual, location. For Neo, it is like going through the looking glass to discover that his body is floating in womb-red amnion.

"Metal tubes, surreal versions of hospital tubes, obscure his face. Other lines like IVs are connected to limbs and cover his genitals," reads the Wachowskis' screenplay. "He is struggling desperately now. Air bubbles into the Jell-O but does not break the surface. Pressing up, the surface distends, stretching like a red rubber cocoon."

Outside of that cocoon, the dizzy, nauseous Neo finally finds out the truth, that he is a slave, like everyone else—born into bondage, kept inside a prison that he could not smell, taste or touch—until now. He is assaulted by the image of towers of glowing petals, each representing a cocooned person, spiraling up to an incomprehensible height as well as disappearing into the dim murk like an underwater abyss. Insect-like machines are dispatched to recover the recalcitrant computer hacker.

The people in THE MATRIX's future have grown most of their lives within a power plant, and within that power plant, there are support mechanisms for them. Cerebral needles are implanted within their heads with a socket, and a number of sockets are inserted down the center of their spines. For waste products, there's a cod-piece with various bags and a catheter. There are IVs that fit into their arms. "The model department has made about 40 different little pieces that go onto the bodies which are in the power plant," said Paterson.

The more human side of the real future world is represented by the rebels' hovercraft, the Nebuchadnezzar, on 18 chain blocks so the filmmakers could move the whole set up if necessary and move the walls out of the way.

Said Paterson, "There's a mechanical look to [the ship], but also a slightly more organic feel to it. We've avoided the obvious outgoing organic struc-

OWEN PATERSON, DESIGNER

"There's always a little backstory to explain a particular thing [in the design]. It's not that I just think something's cool. The Wachowskis had a clear idea on what they wanted to do."



Setting up the mock helicopter and huge transillite backdrop of Sydney to film Keanu Reeves' climactic aerial attack (right) under controlled studio conditions.

ture of a lot of the things that you'd obviously pick up because the Nebuchadnezzar is what we like to think of as a bottom dwelling fish, in a lake, hanging around these super big drains that've come from a very affluent society in our own future. We've attempted to take some of those organic shapes of what a fish that lives at the bottom of a sewer might look like."

Most of the action on The Nebuchadnezzar takes place on the main deck. Said Paterson, "The ecto chairs are a cross between barber's chairs and dentist chairs and 1920s technology. There's about three hundred moving pieces to them if you count all the bits, which make them very complex. They're a bit like a parallelogram, so they can be raised up and the chair can be reclined and the back can be reclined, so you can go from a seated position to a reclining position for when you are then transported into the Matrix.

"What we've tried to do with the design is to go back to the basics. There's a certain retro

feel about this craft. There'll be elements of machinery that you'll think you've seen somewhere else, like in your car or on an air conditioner. It's that line—we're taking foundry type objects, a fan cast base which is going to make the core, up to fine pieces of machined metal, to electronic parts components.

"The other thing we've tried to do is rather than hide everything, we've tried to expose the guts of the machine, all this cabling, out into the forefront. So rather than have all that clean, streamlined spaceship, it's more like the internals of a very large submarine or the internals of a battleship.

"Originally we considered this a military vessel, which over the years has been adapted. As things have broken because the human race is no longer in a position where it can manufacture what it wants, a lot of those pieces have been replaced by jerry-rigged-in cabling or wire. Things are held together by fencing wire and plastic bands almost."

While the action scenes are

intended to emulate the look of Hong Kong action films, in MATRIX the fights cause literal damage to two digital environments. Noted Paterson, "When someone hits a wall they don't just go hard against the wall, they actually penetrate the wall. Larry and Andy are trying to cross that boundary of what is total reality with concrete walls that don't break to the Matrix, which is, as we say, part of a computer code. And if you are a part of that and you are aware of it, then you can break some of those rules so something will break if you go against it and not necessarily be smashed to pieces as you or I would be."

The virtual reality, "normal



business" world has been given a cold, modern, steel and glass, antiseptic look. Said Paterson, "Within our matrix city we have towers of glass and steel. With this government building we have a color scheme that's fairly green and within it it's not a terribly nice place because the agents just hang out here and commit nasty business. I guess we're trying to give the feeling that it's not a great place to be. And as Larry and Andy would suggest, as you move out of downtown sections of the matrix, you move into areas of deterioration."

Paterson noted that a lot of thought has been given to the design work. "There's always got to be a little backstory to explain a particular thing," he said. "It's not that I just think something looks cool."

"Larry and Andy had so much of a clear idea on what they wanted to do," said Osborne. "It's actually great to work with them because they are innovative. They've got a new take on things." □

KEEP ON TREKKIN'

WILLIAM SHATNER

Captain Kirk finds life beyond the final frontier, including a satire of Trek fandom.

By Anna L. Kaplan

When asked to describe his latest movie, *FREE ENTERPRISE*, William Shatner enthused, "It's monumental! It's one of the great works of all times, like *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*, 2001, those kind of films. This is monumental in the same way. It's ground breaking, it's earth-shattering, and it's innovative. How's that?"

He said all this without so much as a chuckle. *FREE ENTERPRISE* is, in fact, a romantic comedy that was previously titled *TREKKERS* about, yes, two *STAR TREK* and sci-fi fans who meet the legendary Shatner and hope he will help them with their personal problems.

"Maybe it's a little smaller than what I'm describing," Shatner acknowledged with a laugh. "It's a fun film, made by a couple of young independent filmmakers. Just getting a film made these days is kudo enough. These young guys have done it. They asked me to be a part of it. Essentially that was it."

The two film makers are Mark Altman, the former editor of *Sci-Fi Universe* and frequent contributor to *Cinefantastique*, and his friend Robert Meyer Burnett. The two co-wrote the script, which Altman produced, and Burnett directed and edited. Absolutely essential to the movie was Shatner. How did they get him to agree to play the role, without which there would have been no story? Explained the actor, "To begin with, I did-



Shatner plays himself in *FREE ENTERPRISE*, offering advice to 30-something science fiction fan Rafer Weigel, who feels the urge to "get a life."

n't [agree]. They had written a script which involved me being a guru. I couldn't do that. I kept saying no. Finally, they had shed enough tears, I thought. I suggested that we rewrite it and make him in need of as much help as they needed. That's what happened. We rewrote my part of the script and tried to make him, this character of Shatner, more needy. It was entertaining. I wanted to indicate that nobody has it made, and everyone has the same needs. People put their pants on the same way. The world is all the same."

Shatner continued, "In fact, both guys had this feeling about this character, the actor Shatner. When they were kids they used to think, 'What would Shatner do?' They put it in the script. Obviously it was because I was playing Captain

Kirk. They assumed, as children, that the actor and the character were one, little knowing that the efforts of the writer were somewhere in between."

Although most of *FREE ENTERPRISE*'s references to Shatner's past involve *STAR TREK*, mention is also made of *T. J. HOOKER*. Shatner starred as T. J. Hooker from 1982 to 1986. Joining him on the show were James Darren and Heather Locklear. During the film, the character of Shatner speaks about Locklear. Shatner himself retains warm feelings about James Darren, saying, "I love Jimmy Darren. He's a wonderful guy."

Shatner did not know that Darren now plays a recurring character on *STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE*, Vic Fontaine, a holographic 1960s

Las Vegas singer. When told about this, Shatner laughed, "No kidding? How wonderful. I'll have to take a look at that. He's in his element. Jimmy is very funny."

Darren, in turn, said about working with Shatner on *T. J. HOOKER*, "I had a really good time with him, actually. I see Bill once in awhile, and it's fun. It's always nice to see him. I would work with him again, gladly. I'd love to."

While Shatner is without a doubt best known to genre fans as Captain James Tiberius Kirk, he has had a long, successful career as an actor on stage, television, and film. He guest-starred on an amazing number of television dramas, especially during the '60s and '70s, everything from *PLAYHOUSE 90*, *DR. KILDARE* and *THE DEFENDERS*, to *THE MAN FROM UNCLE*, and *MISSION IMPOSSIBLE*. His genre credits include *THE OUTER LIMITS* episode entitled "Cold Hands, Warm Heart," and two highly-regarded *TWILIGHT ZONE* episodes, "Nick of Time" and "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet." Besides starring in the original *STAR TREK* series and *T. J. HOOKER*, Shatner narrated *RESCUE 911* for six seasons. His first directing jobs were multiple episodes of *T. J. HOOKER*. He went on to direct, among other things, *STAR TREK V* as well as *TEK WAR*, the television series based on his *Tek War* novels, in which he also played Walter Bascom. He appeared as Captain Kirk in all the *STAR TREK* features through



The king of all media, Shatner in *FREE ENTERPRISE*, leaving Kirk behind to embark on a career as writer, commercial pitchman and TV producer.

GENERATIONS. He provided the voice of Kirk for the animated *STAR TREK* series, and more recently, did the same for multiple computer games such as "Starfleet Academy."

Shatner's comedic talents were often visible, for example when he guested on *THE FRESH PRINCE OF BEL-AIR*, or during the famous *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE* routine when he told a group of fans to "Get a life." Shatner writes fiction and nonfiction, and is a businessman with an active Internet presence. He is also promoting a pre-paid phone calling card program with AT&T featuring *STAR TREK* cards. "I have other books, and scripts, and projects, and companies," said Shatner. "I'm very busy." Not surprisingly, Robert Burnett introduced Shatner to the audience at the U.S. premiere of *FREE ENTERPRISE* as "The king of all media."

He took the time to talk about some of his projects. One is a television miniseries

based on his *Man O' War* science fiction books, whose protagonist Benton Hawkes often reminds readers of both Captain Kirk and Shatner. "A four part miniseries is waiting for the head of Showtime to greenlight, which I would direct and star in, based on one of my books, *Man O' War*. I've got a four hour, wonderful script, and even some sketches of what the visuals will be like, so I'm waiting with great anticipation."

Shatner continued, "I've got a book coming out called *Get A Life*. I did a lot of research into what the conventions are, who goes to the conventions and why, and what the audience sees in *STAR TREK*. I found the people that I came in contact with fascinating."

Does he enjoy doing *STAR TREK* convention appearances? "Very much," said Shatner. "They are performing. It's a stand-up comedy routine, for an hour, hour-and-a-half. You evolve a routine, and that's what you do."

"We rewrote my part of the script," said Shatner. "We tried to make this character of Shatner more needy. I wanted to indicate that nobody has it made."

The actor does admit to missing Captain Kirk, at least a little bit. He has been continuing the adventures of Kirk in a series of *STAR TREK* novels for Pocket Books, along with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens. The first was *The Ashes of Eden*. Then *The Return* brought Kirk back to life after the events of the film *GENERATIONS*. Kirk continues saving the universe in the national best-selling books *Avenger* and *Spectre*, soon to be followed by *Dark Victory*. Shatner said, "I'm writing. I'm telling some stories that are good. I've been telling my version of what I think *STAR TREK* is, and what I think Captain Kirk is. It's been very educating to me."

He continued, speaking about *STAR TREK: GENERATIONS*: "It was strange to be on the set where I felt I was the guest on a *STAR TREK* film. I felt like I was a guest. Everybody adjusts, and so *STAR TREK* has gone on without me. It seems rather strange, but it has gone on without me, and without the whole cast. That's the way it is."

Shatner also admits that the occasional fan confuses him

with Kirk. He laughed, "My wife doesn't, but some people do. I make them salute."

He talked about a high point for him in the making of *FREE ENTERPRISE*. His character, Shatner, is trying to make a musical version of William Shakespeare's *JULIUS CAESAR*, in which he plays all the parts except Calpurnia. He says he would like Calpurnia to be played by Sharon Stone, or in a T. J. HOOKER reference, Heather Locklear. Shatner explained, "I had this crazy idea that if Shatner was trying to sell a movie, it would be like a musical of *JULIUS CAESAR*. In order to show the audience that Shatner wasn't totally mad, he had to sing a number and make it work. I rap with Rated R. I went into a studio late at night with a group of guys that are rap artists. They are artists but they look very funky. At first glance, you wouldn't think that they are musical artists. I grew to love them. They were the greatest young men, and wonderful poets really, or Rated R is. He polished his lyrics, he was into the rhythm. He wanted to know what the theme of [the speech] 'Friends, Romans

Shatner and rappers Rated R perform "No Tears For Caesar," a comic highlight of *FREE ENTERPRISE*, as Shatner mounts a Shakespeare musical.



and countrymen...’ was. He came up with some wonderful stuff. I rapped the soliloquy, and sang some of the background. He rapped alongside me. We were in the studio for two nights putting together a number, along with the mixers and the producer, who finally put it all together. It was an enormous experience. Of all the things that could have happened, that was the most electrifying for me.”

The Julius Caesar rap number ends FREE ENTERPRISE. At the time of this interview, Shatner had not yet seen the completed film or rap performance. He laughed, “I don’t know how it’s going to turn out. Everybody says they like it. The people who have talked to me have said they liked it, but I’ve been very apprehensive about it. It’s a walk on the wild side, that’s for sure. It’s totally outrageous, and great fun if it comes off. If it doesn’t come off, you are such a fool.”

William Shatner spoke to the audience before the late night premiere of FREE ENTERPRISE. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed his entire performance, including the rap lyrics, “No tears for Caesar.” Mark Altman said that the general public attending the next showing had an even better time. Shatner needn’t have worried. □

Filming Shatner as the imagined voice of wisdom to generations of Trekkers in FREE ENTERPRISE.



THE FILMING OF FREE ENTERPRISE

Trek fans Robert Meyer Burnett and Mark A. Altman strike close to home.

By Dan Scapperotti

The world of science fiction fandom gets a reality check when a pair of Trekkies are faced with the looming arrival of their 30th birthdays. Hey, what are we doing with our lives? Filmmakers have failed to touch on the subject perhaps because the plot seems so limited. What more can you say about a bunch of geeks running around in home made Star Trek uniforms. Well, plenty, according to Mark Altman, co-writer and producer of FREE ENTERPRISE. After all it takes one to know one. Altman has the credentials. A CFQ contributor and former editor of *Sci-Fi Universe*, Altman was called “the Socrates of Sci-Fi” by the Sci-Fi Channel.

Altman was working with his collaborator, Robert Burnett, on a script for a Jewish supernatural horror film called DAY OF ATONEMENT when they were confronted with a severe case of writer’s block. Suddenly, a casual remark sent them in another direction. “As a lark one day I said to Rob, ‘You know we should do something about our screwed up crazy lives,’” said Altman. “‘You know, going shopping for laser disks and being science fiction fans and all of the dysfunctional activity that comes with it.’”

Recalling Woody Allen’s PLAY IT AGAIN SAM, Altman said “Maybe our Humphrey Bogart would be William Shatner who would come and give



Director Robert Meyer Burnett sets up a shot with cinematographer Charles L. Barbee (l). Burnett co-wrote the film with fellow Trek fan Mark A. Altman.

us advice. We thought that would be fun to work on so I started writing it. The pair finished the script and took several pages to the producer they were working for on DAY OF ATONEMENT who agreed to shelve the original project and concentrate on the new film.

The script focused on two guys, coincidentally named Mark and Robert, played by Eric McCormack and Rafer Weigel, who decide they’ve got to get their lives on track. Originally, the script called for an imaginary William Shatner character to pop up now and again to give advice to the two fans, but Shatner himself suggested a different approach. According to Altman, when they contacted the actor about doing the film he said “Listen I don’t have any of the answers. I’m a screwed up guy. I’m more screwed up than these guys. Why don’t you show a character like that, then I would be more interested in playing it.”

Okay! Back to the drawing boards. “He’s still the manifestation of their Id at the beginning,” Altman explained, “but later on in the movie they actually meet Shatner. Their meeting him actually gives illumination into their own lives. In the film, Shatner is just a really screwed up guy. He’s a drunk. He can’t get anywhere with women. He’s the antithesis of Kirk and it works great. Based on that rewrite he came aboard. It was the right direction for the character. The

right direction for the movie. He’s like Peter O’Toole in MY FAVORITE YEAR. He had a great sense of where the story should go. He’s fantastic in it, hysterical.

“It’s for people who love science fiction by people who love science fiction. It’s a love story about the genre as well as a love story between two people. Although this is more of a romantic comedy, I like to think this has more of a Woody Allen influence to it than anything else. The real joy, I think, was working with someone like Bill Shatner. In the past a lot of people have said things like he’s egotistical, he’s hard to work with, but we found none of those things. There were days when we would work exceptionally long hours and he was always happy to be there. He would always be there for the other guy’s close up and was always having fun, kicking back, smoking a cigar, laughing with the crew. Just a delight.”



Eric McCormack as a Trek fan turning 30, who imagines himself hunted down in a LOGAN'S RUN-inspired dream sequence and turns to Shatner for advice.

“I said to Rob ‘We should do something about our screwed-up, crazy lives. You know...being sci-fi fans and all the dysfunctional activity that comes with it.’”

sically it's a science fiction film and television magazine that the character works for. It's basically an amalgamation of a lot of the magazines that you see out there, including *Cinefantastique*. Mark is the other protagonist in the movie. He's a guy who's dreading turning 30. He's having lots of LOGAN'S RUN nightmares over the fact that he's turning 30 and feels his life is over because he hasn't accomplished what he set out to do. He's dating these hot actresses and models, but can't really get involved in a meaningful relationship.”

Besides getting writing credit on FREE ENTERPRISE, Altman is also one of the producers, a job that kept him hopping, trying to cover everything from overseeing the casting to dealing with what the crew would have for lunch. “When you're at this level and you're not a Joel Silver with an \$80 million budget, you pretty much have to be involved in every aspect of the production,” Altman said. “You have to be responsible for everything from the small, most mundane aspects, to the big issues, including marketing and publicity and distribution issues as well. I had to deal with such a problem as not having the special effects guy around when we're shooting the bubble bath.”

A bubble bath? Altman was also a little confused. “Why do we need a special effects guy for a bubble bath? We're not blowing it up,” he said. “According to SAG rules we need a hypo-allergenic bubble bath for the actress in the scene. And it became a whole issue because the special effects people have to be there to put in the bubble bath. Of course I had to deal with situations like that. As producer I oversaw the post production process including the sound mix and dealing with the talent, and clearances for things that we show in the movie.”

One of Altman's major challenges on the film was securing rights to props positioned through the movie. “Because we're using so many toys, getting the rights to use all that was very daunting,” he said, “but ultimately we were able to get everybody to sign off. Because this movie was so steeped in pop culture this movie was a very difficult movie to do on this scale but ultimately making it look like a big movie and delivering on the promises of the script was a challenge. I certainly think that we did that.”

Rather than a shoestring, direct to video film quickly thrown together, FREE ENTERPRISE is an independent film in the realm of SWINGERS

scheduled to be released theatrically this year by a major studio. “It's a big deal,” said Altman. “It doesn't necessarily cost a lot, but the vision is much bigger. We had over 60 speaking parts, all SAG actors. We had nearly 40 different locations that we shot on, including restaurants, comic book stores, futuristic cities, apartments, Toys 'R' Us. We were all over town shooting in a variety of locations. It was a major undertaking. It's a traditional romantic comedy in the guise of a hip indy comedy.” □

“It's funny because we had been a little affected by hearing people badmouthing him. Even though this guy was sort of an idol to us and someone we had a great deal of respect for, we were worried that working with him would sort of sour our illusions about him. But it didn't. If anything they reaffirmed why we had so much respect for him. If anything we have more respect for him now as a professional and as an actor. You see him on talk shows and he's over the top and he acts like a buffoon. In this movie he underplays and he's understated.”

While the film is a romantic comedy it addresses some serious elements especially in relationships between sci-fi fans and the opposite sex. “Even though there's a lot of funny stuff going on in the movie and a lot of straight comedy, there are serious issues and metaphors,” said Altman. “One of the things we were concerned about was that people would think this is the wacky Bill Shatner movie and it's anything but that. He may be amusing to a certain extent, but at the heart of this movie is the relationship between the character of Robert and this girl Claire whose played by Audie England. She shares many of the things that he does in movies

and comics and science fiction, but she also expects him to be responsible and not spend the rent money on buying a new Star Trek collectible.”

Claire and Robert, who works as an editor at Full Eclipse Studios, a low budget B movie company, meet, appropriately enough, in a Golden Apple comic book store where Claire manages to snare the last copy of a comic Robert wants. Their acerbic conversation over the comic book in the middle of the store prompts him to pursue her on a date.

In the film, Mark, interestingly enough, is the editor of Geek magazine. “It's sort of a thinly veiled version of a magazine that I used to run called *Sci-Fi Universe*,” he said. “Ba-

Rafer Weigel plays the Sandman trying to off McCormack in the LOGAN'S RUN dream sequence, which used costumes and props from the 1976 movie and later TV series.



XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS

Producer and series creator Rob Tapert on his Sword & Sorcery action amazon.

By Dan Scapperotti

She is a television phenomenon. A character who began as a murderous villain but found redemption. A female Lone Ranger, who, along with her trusty companion, wanders the land dispensing justice. She's XENA, WARRIOR PRINCESS, perhaps the most popular spin-off program to come out of the ranks of syndicated television. To close out the first season of HERCULES: THE LEGENDARY JOURNEYS, a new character was created for a three-episode arc that includes "The Warrior Princess," "The Gauntlet" and "Unchanged Heart." Even before the episodes aired there were plans for a spin-off series to replace VANISHING SON, a failed series in Universal Studios Action Pak package. Since the success rate for action adventure heroines was low, spinning off a series based on a woman who could kick some serious butt wasn't initially greeted with a standing ovation.

Renaissance Pictures, the production company behind both XENA and HERCULES, was originally established by Sam Raimi, Bruce Campbell and Robert Tapert to produce THE EVIL DEAD in 1981. Since then the company has produced two sequels to the horror cult classic, as well as DARKMAN, a three-picture series.



New Zealand star Lucy Lawless as the Warrior Princess in third season's serio-comic episode "Warrior...Priestess...Tramp," as Xena takes the place of her conjuring look-alike and nearly gets burned at the stake for her troubles.

Lucy Lawless, an unknown New Zealand actress who had appeared in a couple of HERCULES episodes, was cast as Xena. The character was introduced as a female warlord who sets out to kill Hercules, the only man who stands in the way of her conquering Arcadia. She seduces Iolaus, Hercules' sidekick, in an effort to weaken the Greek hero. Her plans ultimately fail and Xena herself is imperiled when, during an attack on a helpless town, she saves the life of a baby. The gesture is seen as a weakness. Xena's army turns on her and she is forced to walk a brutal gauntlet. A strong body and firm will enables Xena to survive the onslaught and she wanders off alone into the wilderness.

Later, allied with Hercules, Xena kills her treacherous lieutenant, Darphus, but Ares, the God of War, restores Darphus to life and sends him on a killing rampage. Hercules and Xena become lovers as they battle the undead creature, finally destroying Darphus and thwarting Ares' plans.

"It was very much a struggle at first to get that on the air," admitted producer Rob Tapert. "There were very few traditional women as hero shows and they had not done particularly well. I wanted to try a tough woman character, so we introduced her on HERCULES. Once the studio, who had been bugging us for another show,



Lawless faces the Biblical Goliath (Todd Rippon) in second season's "The Giant Killers," an exquisitely composed forced perspective shot by Flat Earth Effects.

saw her, they instantly suggested that we do a spin-off. There was some resistance but ultimately some guys from the Tribune Group thought it was a good idea and they fell in line."

Tapert, who had produced the *EVIL DEAD* and *DARKMAN* films, had always wanted to do a female superhero show but couldn't get a hook original enough to launch the project. A fan of Hong Kong action films, Tapert was inspired by movies like *THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR* and *SWORDSMAN I, II, and III*. "I thought there were elements in those that I could use in crafting the woman villain," said Tapert. "We then worked on *XENA* and I realized the take would be to do a woman who is evil and turns good and make her the superhero. I never had that before and it allowed Xena to go forward. It all fell into place, at least in my mind and the writing staff's mind. This was a tale of redemption told from the point of

view of a woman who's a mass murderer. It gave us a big backdrop and a lot of character traits to play with in terms of writing. At least at the time it was different from anything on television." In traditional fashion, the murderous but repentant Xena was to have been killed off at the end of the trilogy. The decision to give the character her own series prompted a quick

rewrite.

In September, 1995, "Sins of the Past," the show's first episode aired on syndicated stations across the country. Much like Batman's Robin and Hercules' Iolaus, Xena needed someone to talk to as she traveled the lands of the ancient world. Along comes Gabrielle, a character who was to propel the Warrior Princess into per-

sonal realms that would have stunned television writers a decade ago. The role went to Texan Renee O'Connor, who had appeared in "The Switch," the eighth episode of HBO's *TALES FROM THE CRYPT*, directed by Arnold Schwarzenegger, and *DARKMAN II: RETURN OF DURANT*, the second of the trilogy co-produced by Tapert with his longtime partner Sam Raimi.

Gabrielle is a spunky, non-violent type, the antithesis of the act-first-ask-questions-later Xena. At first a Xena groupie, Gabrielle takes up her staff as a non-lethal weapon of defense. Soon the spirited young woman is as expert with her weapon of choice as Xena is with her chakram. Soon Xena and Gabrielle had their hands full battling gods, monsters, evil priests, out of control warlords and a host of other denizens of ancient Greece.

The writers aren't adverse to having Xena intrude on other myths and legends. She

Lawless subdues Hudson Leick as "Callisto," a popular first season character out for revenge, killed-off in the cliffhanger that ended the third season.





Lucy Lawless as Xena in the clutches of Hope, Gabrielle's child by demon god Dahot in the currently airing fourth season show "A Family Affair." XENA is produced by Tapert's Renaissance Pictures for Universal Television syndication.

gets involved in the Trojan War in "Beware of the Greek Bearing Gifts." She was there when the Israelites and Philistines were at each other's throats and young David went up against Goliath in "Giant Killer." They even gave their own spin to Charles Dickens' holiday classic in "A Solstice Carol." Along the way, Xena runs into several historic figures including Julius Caesar, Cleopatra and Hippocrates.

Even Xena's adventures aren't confined to her native land. Xena's travels have taken her to Britain, Rome, China and other parts of the ancient world. There was even an excursion into the 1940's when Lawless and O'Connor played characters who find "The Xena Scrolls," an ancient history of the Warrior Princess' adventures. "It's the number one-rated show in that universe," pronounced Tapert. "You're always surprised when something works and you're always shocked when it doesn't. I was surprised by the success and I'm always surprised at what people like and don't like about it."

When the series first aired there were significant differences between HERCULES and XENA. Surprisingly, XENA was more violent and the sexual encounters more blatant, a situation that was toned-

down when it became known that young girls were part of the viewing audience. But as the seasons passed, and XENA began edging out HERCULES in some markets, things changed.

"The differences between HERCULES and XENA have blurred in this season coming up," said Tapert, "because we demystified Hercules a little bit by making him not so much the ever so right good guy. The real differences are Herc was a good guy and Xena was a bad guy. Herc is the story of somebody

we hope is out there protecting us from monsters and saving us from the bad guys and Xena is the good guy we hope is inside ourselves. Meaning, we've all done bad things and we all need some amount of atonement. So Xena is the hero we hope we can be and Herc's the hero who's out there beating up the bad guys.

"In the past I would say that Xena had more violence. There's different styles of fighting between the two. Xena tends to be more acrobatic and Herc more powerful. Xena has

Lawless displays her flair for comedy in second season's "Warrior...Princess...Tramp," as a script by series co-creator R. J. Stewart introduces Xena to two loopy look-alikes.



"Xena is the good guy we hope is inside ourselves," said Rob Tapert. "We've all done bad things and we all need atonement. Xena is the hero we hope we can be."

probably more weapons in it. Xena kills more and gets away killing more than Herc does."

The tone of XENA extends from slapstick comedy to the depths of tragedy. The writers walk a very thin line in pacing the stories and the producer isn't always sure that they've found the right beats. Noted Tapert, "There is a part of me that says you're much better off doing a comedy every single week, and, there's another part of me that likes to tell dramatic stories that are different from anything that is on TV, like this season's two-part opener," said Tapert. "Even on HERCULES they were really dark stories. We try to balance it by doing a couple of dark ones, then a couple of lighter shows and some straightforward standard Xena adventures like where the bad warlord has to be put down. I do like to keep that mix. This season was going to be a little darker and I keep winding it back to a little lighter.

"It's interesting—the studio did a bunch of research over the summer contacting the actual people who watch the show and it turned out that people enjoyed the comedies more than the dark drama. Not by much. It was like 55 to 45%. I feel we can get away with different tones as long as they're not boring."

In "The Bitter Suite," a XENA musical, Gabrielle's hidden the fact that her baby, Hope, is alive and a danger to Xena's own son, Solan. "That was Rob Tapert's vi-

XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS

LUCY LAWLESS

The New Zealand beauty on the rigors and rewards of starring as TV's fantasy action heroine.

By Dan Scapperotti

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the popular XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS franchise has been the versatility of its lead, Lucy Lawless. No other actress on television today is called upon to display such a wide range of emotions. From week to week the Xena writers place on Lawless' bare shoulders the fate of the show. Whether battling demons sent by the gods to plague her or dealing with the loss of her child, Xena is center stage. Only a few years ago Lawless was a gold miner. "I worked for a gold mining company in Australia," she explained in her delightful Kiwi accent, usually disguised on the show. "I was out in the outback digging away. There weren't nuggets lying around on the earth. They measure gold in dirt in parts per million and billion. There was no gold to be seen but it was very interesting to the qualified geologist."

Xena first appeared in "The Warrior Princess" episode of HERCULES. Lawless now seems so identified with the role that it seems amazing that she wasn't the producers' first choice when the character was given her own spin-off series. "I was sort of the local backup girl if everybody else fell through," said Lawless. "Which they did. God bless their little hearts."

Lawless had previously appeared in two HERCULES shows, first as an Amazon lieutenant in "Hercules and the Amazon Women" and then as



Lawless goes over the script with series creator, producer (and husband) Rob Tapert, who married his star in March 1998, at the end of last year's third season.

the wife of a mythical centaur in "As Darkness Falls." While the producers were impressed with the actress's abilities, distribution factors seemed to demand an American in the role. When the first casting choices became unavailable and with production start fast approaching they decided to cast the New Zealand native.

"I think a lot of people don't turn on our show because they think that it's silly karate fantasy," said Lawless. "But they're missing out on a great show. I'm so blessed to have this role which offers me unlimited challenge in all directions. I've never been bored in the role. As hard as it's been or as pleasurable, it's never been easy. The comedies are a little more rewarding than the dramas for me because they take less out of me and they give me a lot of yucks.

I do enjoy them a little more these days. I do know to appreciate this role. There is not an actress alive much less dead who has had such a wide role in any television series ever."

The show was designed as a dark-edged, action-driven hour of television. Although comedy had been sprinkled among some episodes, as Lawless' versatility became apparent, the writers began tapping into her comedic abilities more and more. One of the wackiest episodes of the show was "Warrior...Princess...Tramp." R.J. Stewart penned the farce which has Xena meeting two look-alikes; Diana, the naive princess and the bawdy, dimwitted Meg. A triple role like that would normally call for all the scenes with each character shot at the same time-giving the actress time to get into character and sustain it

until all those scenes were shot. "You haven't got time to be shooting like that," laughed Lawless. "That's a luxury we can't afford on our schedule. That's why there aren't that many physical differences between them because I would have to go in one shot from playing Meg to playing Diana to playing Xena all in the same half an hour. It took a bit of mental gymnastics but I loved that. I can't tell you how pleasurable that is.

"I had to method it out a little beforehand. Okay, I'm playing me dressed as the princess who is pretending to be Xena. It's pretty complex. But it's real fun. I'm the sort of actress who can't over-prepare. It just steals all my spontaneity. So I set my mind on this character pretending to be *this* character dressed as *this* character. I'm playing Meg and at this stage of the episode I only know so much of the plot where another character would be further ahead in their understanding of the world. I map these things out loosely before hand and then I just go and be it. For me that's the most pleasurable and best way to work and seems to get the most laughs."

The gimmick was so successful that it was recycled the following season as "Warrior...Priestess...Tramp." The episode reunites Xena with Meg, now a bartender in a local brothel. The third spoke in this comedic wheel is Leah, a Hestian vestal virgin. Lawless plays the character using her own voice but with a distinctive lisp.

In "The Furies" a scheming

Ares has the Furies drive Xena mad as punishment for not avenging her father's death. Scripter R. J. Stewart actually mentioned the Three Stooges in the stage direction on his script and Lawless is a delight as the wacked out Warrior Princess. "I'd never seen the Stooges until the night before," she said. "I kind of knew how they acted because I'd seen Bruce Campbell and kids acting like them before. I'd seen a little bit but never a whole picture. I saw one the night before and I sort of went with it. But I'm just basically an extremely silly person anyway. When it works, it works. I think we're going to see a lot more comedy coming up."

All is not just fun and games on the set, especially when you're the focus of attention. For the fourth season two-part opener, the grind finally got to Lawless. Xena is in a desolate region. The shows were filmed three hours south of Auckland on the desert road away from the usual production locations. "Those two episodes were extremely dark," Lawless admitted, "and it nearly killed me. They were exhausting, physically. It was freezing and that was just the beginning of a whole block of episodes, very Lucy-heavy episodes. I was really pushed to my limits. Absolutely to the limit. I really had to change my way of looking at the world after those episodes because otherwise I was just going to become the sort of star that I never want to be. Just somebody who thinks that nobody understands their pain. Just a brat, an adult brat. I so disrespect that in people in my profession. Actors who won't come out of their trailers because they think that they're bigger than anybody else."

"I think I just hit the fourth season slump. Usually it happens in the third season and producers know this. Stars usually go through a time in their third season where they just have a complete conniption and become a pain in the ass to work with. I sort of sailed through my third season but in the fourth I just felt this terrible slump. I managed to sort of hide it to a large degree but there wasn't any of that joie de vie that I usu-



Lawless as Xena, fighting Kevin Smith as Ares, the God of War, who tries to draw her back to her dark warlord past in an ongoing love/hate relationship.

ally have. I really went on a downer. I've come through it and I'm so much better and happier and appreciate all the great things I have in my life. But for a period there I couldn't. I just went through a desolate time. I have the man of my dreams, a great job, a happy healthy daughter and a wonderful home. But I couldn't appreciate it."

Lawless is confronted weekly with the most physical challenges of any woman on television. Riding, running, leaping into the air and, of course, battling Roman legions, vicious bandits, and armies of religious fanatics. "I do all the fighting," said the actress. "I have a stunt double because we don't have time to shoot everybody else's angles. They'll shoot everything that's facing me, they'll shoot all my angles and then they'll fight again on another day with

second unit team and my wonderful stunt woman, Zoe."

Did Lawless get any kind of training? "Are you kidding?" she asked with a big grin. "I didn't have training. I just went to work the first two years and got smacked around until I learned how to do it. You learn pretty quickly that way. Training? There's no molly coddling. The way we shoot this it's almost guerrilla shooting. It's not like shooting in America. We are the wild, wild west and things are generally done for real so what you see is what you get. I do have a riding double. Anything that's too dangerous or that's going to give me a black eye like working with new actors who have never fought before is done with a stunt woman. You can get another stunt woman, but I'm a little harder to replace."

But there was a time when

Lawless had to be replaced. There was no stunt woman around when the actress was in Los Angeles for an appearance on the Leno Show. Lawless was supposed to ride a horse on to the show but didn't make it. "I was riding a horse on concrete," she said. "It was a western horse and I need an English horse. It's a completely different set of skills and a completely different set of communication with the horse. Anyway, they got me a western horse and I don't know how to ride western and this horse was just pissed off. We did it a couple of times. It was fine and then they said, 'Okay, one more for safety.' I came trotting in, the horse's feet went swish out on the pavement, I'll never forget the sound of hoofs scrapping on cement, and the horse fell. I was thrown clear and I smashed my pelvis." While their star was laid up, the production cleverly reworked a couple of scripts and suddenly Xena was in Callisto's body, courtesy of Ares, the God of War and Hudson Leick became Xena for a couple of episodes.

With an intense shooting schedule there are times when Lawless needs a break and the focus of an episode falls on Renee O'Connor's character, Gabrielle. "We shoot from late October until March and then we have a bit of a break and then we'll shoot until October again," she said. "Thirty-two weeks of filming, but it's broken up with little breaks because there's so much burn-out from all sorts of departments. The Gabrielle shows are designed to give me a break or when it's convention time or I have to go and do a big thing for the industry somewhere."

For a change of pace, writers Adam Armus and Nora Kay Foster set "The Xena Scrolls" in the 1940's. An archeologist and her assistant come across the scrolls which tell of the adventures of the Warrior Princess and her friend, Gabrielle. The show gave Lawless and Renee O'Connor a chance to play dual roles. "I loved that," Lawless said. "I loved putting on modern clothes. I got to use a Southern accent. It was a funny story. I loved getting out of the armor. It was my dream. I loosely plan



Lawless cradles Renee O'Connor as Gabrielle, her faithful companion, grieving over the death of a comrade in fourth season's "A Good Day." Lawless has proven herself an accomplished dramatic actress during the course of the series.

what I want to do, that's my acting style. I've experimented with different ways of working but this really works best for me, the way my brain operates. I just go in there and love it and laugh. Anything that makes the crew laugh is generally a hit so that's what we gauge it on."

The two Greek heroes were also featured in an animated film called appropriately enough, *HERCULES AND XENA: THE ANIMATED MOVIE*. Kevin Sorbo and Lawless provided the voices for their animated counterparts. Is Lawless now a candidate for Disney? "I'm ready, baby, I'm ready," she said gleefully. "It was quite difficult at the time. I think I was a bit intimidated by the process and I found it difficult to be Xena (a) out of costume and (b) just the sound of my own voice kind of scared me, I think. I found that surprisingly difficult just standing around in the booth. The next time I do one I'll understand how that works a little better so I can imagine things more fully than I could at the time."

One of Xena's trademarks is her warrior scream as she leaps high over the heads of sword-wielding ruffians and soldiers. "Rob [Tapert] wanted, for lack of a better word, a gimmick," Lawless explained. "He wanted something like Tarzan's yodel. We were watching CNN and

there were those Arabic women who make that sound and he said, 'That's kind of what I want.' But I couldn't do it the way they did so I just bastardized it and made up my own and it seems to have stuck. You don't want to hear that in an enclosed space."

Upcoming episode plots are generally a mystery to Lawless who isn't part of the script process and she wants to keep it that way. "They don't tell me," she said. "It's a big surprise to me and a big surprise to them what they get back. That is how we work. I don't like to hear about a script, to tell the truth, because it just makes me anxious. Things are either far better or far worse than I anticipate so there is no point in me anticipating anything. I'm much better if I just hear about things three or four days before. That's a good time frame for me. We've learned not to discuss that stuff. It's on a need to know basis. Lucy doesn't have to know."

Over the last few years, Lawless has gone from gold mining in the wilderness to international stardom. A process that has radically changed her life. From being a free spirit the actress has found she must come down to earth and face the fame. "It has changed my life, I guess, in every way," she said. "My daughter is the one constant in my life and now my

husband. I own one pair of socks from my old life, apart from the people. Everything has changed. I still see my old friends but so rarely. I've had to go into microcosms and to accept also my work as my social life because I spend so much time there. I always look to be happy, so when things are a little bit of a struggle I learn to deal with it. I used to just sail through life. Now I don't sail. It's very rewarding but it's hard work. I've had to become much more responsible. I can't just take a day off work because there are people who depend on me to pay their mortgages. I've had to become more responsible in every sort of way."

Just keeping up with the demands of the role is a major challenge for the 31-year-old actress who must face the cameras for 32 weeks a year. "That's why I don't need to get too far ahead," said Lawless. "I'm always fighting to keep on top of it health-wise, work-wise. I've got to have done my homework. I've got to be physically on top of it. And I've got to be happy. I'm the morale officer. I'm in so much of the show that everybody is looking at me all the time and if I behave badly it affects everybody, so I'm very cognizant of the fact of my responsibilities toward everybody and helping them have a good day. □



"You're surprised when something works and you're always shocked when it doesn't," said Tapert. "I'm always surprised at what people like and don't like about it."

sion from day one," advised head writer R. J. Stewart about the musical extravaganza. "Rob and I cooked up this Gabrielle—Hope theme, Gabrielle's baby and the repercussions. When we got to the end of that in the planning stage we have Xena and Gabrielle in this situation where Gabrielle was responsible for the death of Xena's son. Not intentionally, but because she hid the truth about Hope. We realized we needed a resolution to that. Some major episode that would resolve that rift. We all put our thinking caps on about how to do that and Rob came back and said, 'I want to do a musical!'"

"He just drove the writing

Xena suffers in fourth season's "Shark Island Prison," one of the dark shows that balance the comedy.



XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS

WRITING SWORD & SORCERY

Co-executive producer R. J. Stewart on running the writing staff that creates the show's mythology.

By Dan Scapperotti

The responsibilities of keeping XENA alive and well, meaning drawing back audiences week after week, falls to R.J. Stewart and his team of writers who must continually put the Warrior Princess in interesting, action-filled situations. Stewart, a veteran of shows like THE GREAT DEFENDER and REMINGTON STEELE also penned the feature film MAJOR LEAGUE II and did a rewrite that helped save WATERWORLD. The gig on XENA was originally proposed by his agent who sent the writer unfinished cuts of the HERCULES episodes that featured the new character. "I saw Lucy [Lawless] and that's what drew me in," said Stewart. "I never saw a woman sell action the way she did. I smelled success there. What also attracted me was the fact that it had the HERCULES lead in."

Producer Rob Tapert met with the writer and agreed that Stewart's credits on the new show would be "developed by" and co-executive producer. Since then the writer has been promoted to full executive producer. But primarily Stewart is the head writer. He wrote or co-wrote over 20 shows and has rewritten several scripts from freelance writers. "All the scripts go through me before they go out," he advised. "That doesn't mean I write all the scripts. I have to okay them. I supervise the writing staff and I keep in close communication with the pre-production, the post-production and, of course, the actual filming of the thing.



Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) meets her daughter Hope, her child with demon Debauch, in fourth season's "A Family Affair," creating a rift with Xena.

Eric Grunderman is the guy in New Zealand. I keep in close contact with him. Of course, I try to keep in close contact with Rob Tapert at all times because he's the one who owns the company and is the main guy."

For Stewart, the action-adventure-fantasy format offers a lot of freedom to a writer. A freedom that is advocated by Tapert. "Rob encourages us to explore different things," said Stewart, "and we found audiences liked both the dramas and the comedies and as a writer it's hard to resist trying both of those out. I don't think many writers get the opportunity to write such turgid melodrama one week and some outlandish comedy the next. I really enjoy it. It's something we found that we could do in this genre."

When Stewart or one of the other scriptwriters on the show comes up with an idea for an episode, they pitch it to Tapert.

Once the producer approves the suggestion it is sent for development. "Because of my position I can go directly to story," said Stewart. "With anyone else we have a meeting before we go to story."

Once the story is developed a meeting is held to discuss the beat sheet for the episode. "Everyone would give me notes and discuss it and then I would go off and write the script. Steve Sears and Chris Manheim, who are on staff here, would go through the same process. Sometimes we like to meet on the idea even before we go to treatment to discuss it to make sure that somebody doesn't go off in a totally wrong direction. Although I don't rewrite Steve or Chris, I do give them lots of notes. Steve or I rewrite most of the freelancers. Actually Chris rewrote one of the freelancers this year.

"As far as a freelancer goes,

we generally give them the idea. We work and develop the idea with them and then when we get to the point where we think the story is right we send them off to do the script. Some of them hit pretty close so there isn't a lot of rewriting to do. Others miss by a mile and we have to do a pretty big rewrite. That's really not much of a reflection on the writer, whether they're good or not. It's whether they're a good marriage to the show.

"There are some terrific writers who just can't necessarily write in the genre. Some people don't get the sensibility for the show and we have to rewrite them. The other thing is that people who even get the show aren't part of the day to day meetings and don't know the direction we're going so we have to do corrections on things just because they don't know where we went since the last time we had a meeting."

A XENA season consists of 22 shows, 22 mini-movies that have to be ground out in a ten-month period. To maintain that pace there has to be more to drive the creators than just a job. "When Rob and I get together we talk about Xena," said Stewart. "Not because it's work, but because it's what we like to talk about. When you love what you do, you generate ideas. When we came up with the idea of a rift between Xena and Gabrielle ["Maternal Instincts"], we were sitting in the office just laughing and talking about what would be cool to happen on XENA. It doesn't feel like a lot of pressure. Don't get me wrong, there are times



Hudson Leick as first season's "Callisto," with O'Connor and Lucy Lawless. When Lawless was injured during a stunt on the Jay Leno Show, quick thinking by the writers had Callisto switch bodies with Xena for a few weeks recuperation.

when we're sitting staring at a blank board wishing an idea would appear on it. But by and large because we like the show so much, when Rob and I talk, we generate a lot of ideas. I think that's a key to it. We have a passion for the show."

When something unforeseen occurs, writers are left scrambling around to fill in the gaps. When Lucy Lawless fell off her horse and smashed her pelvis while rehearsing for the Leno show, the production schedule left no room for even a temporary shutdown. Stewart and crew went to work. "By necessity we did some outlandish things when she fell off the horse," he said. "We left her in somebody else's body and had Hudson Leick play her. Then we kept her dead for a week.

Centaur Chyron and Young Iolus in YOUNG HERCULES, Flat Earth effects for XENA's kid show companion. Stewart would like to write a Centaur epic.



Those were two interesting shows."

Steve Sears had written an episode called "Intimate Stranger" where Aries switches Xena and Callisto's bodies. At the end of the episode, they were supposed to switch back but a hasty rewrite changed that. "We reopened that episode," said Stewart, "and had Xena stay in Callisto's body. Therefore we could go directly into an existing script without even stopping production. That was amazing. That whole period was sort of surreal. We'd be sitting there watching dailies with Hudson Leick playing Xena. It happened so quickly because we were about to go into production when Lucy fell off the horse. One second I'm working on an episode for Lucy

Lawless and two weeks later I'm seeing it with Hudson Leick playing it. That was a time when I was shocked at how well everything turned out because it was so weird."

Whether feature films or television production, the budget restraints always leave the creative forces behind the projects wanting. "The China episodes were very expensive and the musical was verrrry expensive," Stewart stressed. "If we had triple the budget I would do a major epic centaur show with just an army of centaurs and chariots. We'd have this huge mythical battle. I love centaurs, but when we do them we're so limited. We have about three composites a show. After that it's those actors walking around with the kind of funny girdles that look like horses. If we had an unlimited budget I'd do the ultimate centaur battle.

"We did a show in the first season called 'Hooves and Harlots' which had some nice stuff. The centaur stuff in FANTASIA is terrific, but that's animated. I think somebody, someday, with a huge budget, will do a magnificent live-action centaur piece, and I hope it's me. The centaurs are such interesting creatures. The reason you don't see them more often is that they are extremely expensive to do. It just ups the budget ridiculously." □



"We try to balance the show by doing a couple of dark ones, then lighter ones and some straightforward adventures," noted Tapert. "I do like to keep that mix."

staff crazy with that story and kind of tortured them with it for quite a while but I think it turned out terrific. We thought he was quite mad. Absolutely. That doesn't mean that he isn't quite mad, just quite mad in a very good way."

On a show that can take chances with something from as far afield as "The Bitter Suite," a musical encounter, there are times when Tapert isn't happy with the results. In fact, the producer finds faults with many of the episodes. "Sometimes you try things that don't exactly work," he said. "Every one of them doesn't work for me for one reason or another."

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Co-executive producer, series co-creator and writing staff supervisor R. J. Stewart at Renaissance Pictures.



XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS

SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS

Flat Earth Productions supplies the CGI solutions to realize the show's monsters and fantasy imagery.

By Dan Scapperotti

Neptune, the Sea God rises from the depths, lightning flashes around him, as Xena, stands on a bluff overlooking the ocean ready to do battle against the watery deity. A giant bird preys on Prometheus and carries the Warrior Prince off to its nest. A giant confronts the Warrior Princess. These and other effects are the creation of Flat Earth Productions, an effects house spawned by the HERCULES and XENA television shows. Heading the company is the triumvirate of Kevin O'Neill, Kevin Kutchaver and Doug Beswick who have become experts in the creation of 3D computer generated effects. They recently added YOUNG HERCULES to their production roster as well as independent theatrical films such as BLADE.

In "Warrior... Princess... Tramp" and "Warrior... Priestess... Tramp" Lucy Lawless was called upon to fill three distinct roles. In both shows she played Xena and Meg, a Grecian floozy. In "Princess" she also played Diana, and her third role in "Priestess" was Leah a Hestian virgin priestess. O'Neill and company were called upon to convincingly show the actress in two or three roles simultaneously.

"It's a pretty standard trick," O'Neill explained, "they've been doing all the way back to the days of Georges Melies and such. On Lucy Lawless' part it required a costume change for each role which they, of course, had to do very quickly and turn around because (a) they had to make their day, and (b) because they couldn't break the camera setup for the visual effect of the



Flat Earth co-founders Kevin O'Neill, Kevin Kutchaver and Doug Beswick, running a full service effects house that spring from the needs of XENA.

split screen without screwing up the background. Typically on those simple shots we'd lock the camera down and have Lucy portray her part on the left side, in the middle after a costume change and then a third costume change on the right side as if there were three Lucys in one shot. For the tricky shots, sometimes we'd actually have the camera move into position with one of the characters and do what is called a soft lock off. Then we'd have Lucy finish her performance as character A, do a costume change, finish her performance as character B, and then do a second costume change and do her third character, if there were three of her characters in the frame. A couple of times, in order to facilitate the day and because we wanted to do a slightly trickier visual effects shot, we might have one character hand off something to another while they are both being played by Lucy. We'd have her portray one character in the

background plate and then, later on in the schedule, have her in front of a blue screen, then comp into the background plate later in post production. Those are the kind of tricks that involve visual effects. I know that the director in at least one of the episodes, Josh Becker, studied a lot of older movies like THE BLACK ROOM, a [1935] picture where there were a lot of what they call

camera hook ups. That's where a character would walk behind a big column as one character and then you'd lock a camera down and have her do a costume change and then do the rest of the move again in the second character. That's an old trick in the business where you'd have foreground objects act as soft wipes for changes of character while the camera is supposedly continuously moving. So there's a little bit of everything in each of those episodes."

While XENA is not heavy with 3D animation creatures, Flat Earth uses its bag of tricks to produce an array of visuals. One episode called for a distant volcano. The shot of Xena, with the volcano in the background and 3D cloud elements was composited by Phil Carbonaro. In one show Xena is dragged into an arena by two guards. The shot was another composite, this time using a Phil Carbonaro matte painting. "The first tier from the ground up is a set," explained Kevin O'Neill, "and everything above her and some of the parts behind her and

Xena holds up the head of minstrel Orpheus (Matthew Chamberlain) in effects heavy "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," a motion tracked blue screen composite.





“During the first meeting with [producer Rob Tapert], I sat there and thought that either I was hallucinating or Rob had gone insane.”

Lucy Lawless as XENA gets attacked by the Dryads of second season's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," Flat Earth CGI.

the two guys is a matte painting. We replicated a whole series of people. We built the architecture that they're sitting in which we had to match to the set."

The effects-heavy "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" not only called for a gang of flying skeletons called Dryads, but a disembodied head. Xena and Gabrielle are up against the god Bacchus who has stolen the body of a

minstrel named Orpheus whose music has a calming effect on the rough god. "On the set we had Lucy holding a bag that had a rubber head inside it," said O'Neill. "That was a life cast of Matthew Chamberlain, the actor who played the disembodied head. We set up the scene so that the camera made a half moon dolly track around Lucy as she picked up the bag and began to

pull the rubber head out of the bag itself. That was a background plate. We then went and shot a blue screen element of Chamberlain doing his performance. We locked him down so that his body didn't move, we put a tracking mark on his throat and shot the performance of him opening his eyes looking at Lucy and screaming. Those two elements were sent to Kevin Kutchaver who then composited the blue screen head on top of the rubber head. Actually, the motion-tracked the head out of the bag, rotoed the bag over the head so it looked like it came out of the bag itself and also blended the real actor's hair into the clump of hair that Lucy was holding on the rubber head so it really looked like she was holding his head. If you look real close the head actually swings like it was on a fulcrum from the hair so she's sort of swinging it back and forth as he screams. Everything below the real actor's neck was rotoed out so it was just

the head."

The battle with the Dryads required several rehearsals for the moving camera tracking shots. "We were actually on the set," said O'Neill, "as Lucy and Ted Raimi and Gabrielle all swung at the air to eye lines that we predetermined in a couple of rehearsals. We also had a couple of fans off the set where we blew a lot of dirt and dust and debris. That was a background plate that went back to 3D where Doug Beswick and Everett Burrell and the animators set up the scene and had the Dryads flying in and out of frame swiping at Lucy and Gabrielle as the action dictated in the storyboards. That animation was rendered out and composited by the 2D department.

Last season's surprise was the "Bitter Suite" episode. "Rob has so much going on I couldn't visualize what he wanted to have happen in the episode," said Kutchaver. "[Producer] Rob [Tapert] has been living with this thing for maybe six months as an idea that keeps getting more and more involved. During the first meeting we had with him I sat there and thought that either I was hallucinating because the room started spinning or Rob had gone insane. Really the ideas he was throwing out were wild. There are going to be singing animals. It's going to be a musical. Then we're going to have this guy floating and everyone blows up. It sounded nuts."

Tapert was originally going to direct the episode, but finally Oley Sassone took the helm for the musical extravaganza. The

Phil Carbonaro composited Xena with clouds from a distant volcano. The show's effects budget is less than HERCULES, causing a dearth of 3D CGI creatures.



first problem was to have Tapert, who knew exactly what he wanted, communicate his vision to the effects people. Since the producer wasn't an artist, Kutchaver and O'Neill brought in a storyboard artist to work with Tapert to define his visions.

"The musical episode is an anomaly," said Kutchaver, "a blip when you consider the other 22 episodes. Our biggest creative involvement in the musical Xena were the tarot cards. The artist who worked with him blocked out all the visual stuff that Rob wanted to see happen in the episode. He wanted it to be very strange. He wanted it to be a big fantasy, almost a surreal show."

When Tapert approached O'Neill about the effects for XENA he explained that their budget didn't allow for 3D creatures. The show was being sold as an action series not dependent on special effects. Tapert, however, needed something to grab the audience and attract them to the spin-off and a classic case of the cart before the horse was born. What he wanted was one shot of Neptune, King of the Sea rising out of the water. "We actually did a visual effect for the title sequence," explained Kutchaver. "A 3D character of Neptune all made out of water in a humanoid form rising out and threatening Lucy as Xena who is standing there on a precipice. So our first visual effects shot wasn't even for an episode but a title sequence.

"Once the show became a hit, fans started writing letters and going on the internet asking what episode that shot was from. Is this a lost episode? So in true television history style they felt they had to pony up the dough in terms of what they had already promised so we did an episode, actually three episodes, with Poseidon so far. In the second season we did two. Last season we did another one. So that's the legend of the first 3D creature we did."

Giants have been used in several episodes including the



Flat Earth multiplied Lucy Lawless for a trio of roles in the third season acting tour de force "Warrior...Princess...Tramp." Below: A Phil Carbonaro matte painting adds scope to the show as Xena is dragged into an arena by armed guards. Only the first tier of the stadium was built as a set, the rest including extras, are added CGI constructs.



premiere show "Sins of the Past" and "Giant Killer," the David and Goliath story, Xena style. "The giants are created by the age old technique of forced perspective," said O'Neill. "We line up the camera so that the actors, such as Xena and Gabrielle who are human size are placed in a position that represents a certain scale with buildings and such that is normal. Then we build a platform between those actors and the camera and dress up the platform where the ground would be to match the ground that Xena would be standing on. Then an actor walks on that platform and using a combination of specific wide angle lenses based on the size of the frame and the distance to the regular actors in the distance the scale of what the giant should be, we take that lens information

and futz with it so that the focus is sharp between our giant and the background where we have our real people. The actual composite happens in the camera."

The vicious Harpies that guard the entrance to Hades palace in "Mortal Beloved," a first season episode of XENA, were the first 3D creatures specifically created for the show. "Lucy ends up at the end of an episode in a haunted deserted castle that was guarded by a pair of Harpies, female winged creatures, that attacked her," said Kutchaver. "The interesting thing about that was that there was so little time to design a set beyond the courtyard of the castle that they were going to have to create for the walk and talk photography. We came back to them and suggested that they surround the set with blue

screen. Then we'd set up the whole fight sequence up on a bridge or wall that surrounds the courtyard and we'll create the entire background behind the creatures as well as the creatures in 3D. So that whole fight sequence at the end which I think is the last seven or eight minutes of the episode was an entire CGI 3D animation 2D composite environment with the exception of the courtyard."

Impressed with the Harpies, the producers wanted to use them again, but with a different slant. They were preparing a Halloween episode at the time called "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," directed by T.J. Scott. The god Bacchus turns a group of his maiden minions into Bacchae, flying vampire creatures and Xena and Gabrielle are out to stop them. "We had just done an episode where we did a little homage to JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS with the skeleton fight sequence," said Kutchaver. "So we combined the two ideas and we came up with skeleton harpies called Dryads. So we took the harpies and we made a version that flew around and attacked Lucy in a graveyard when they were looking for Harpy bones to kill Bacchus who was the villain of the week."

The 3D creature effects on XENA have been light over the last few seasons. Instead, Flat Earth has been called upon to deliver environmental 3D shots. "In ULYSSES," said Kutchaver, "which had another appearance of Neptune, we had to create a giant whirlpool and the folks who went into the whirlpool. The whole thing had to be created out of a computer because there was no way that they were going to shoot it live."

When O'Neill and Kutchaver approach the producers about including more interesting creature effects in an episode they're basically told that Xena isn't about effects. It's about her and her friend. "It all depends on what the writers come up with. They feel that the effects might get in the way of their story telling. It falls into a formula." □

Although Tapert likes his brainchild, "The Bitter Suite," he even had reservations about that. The musical episode was the second part of a dark two-part story that began on "Maternal Instincts," in which Xena's son is killed.

Lucy Lawless, who had been trained as a singer, used her own voice in the show as did Kevin Smith, a New Zealand musician who plays the god of war, Ares, and Ted Raimi, the comic relief Joxer.

As the title character, much of the burden for the show lies on the shoulders of Lucy Lawless. As the actress progressed in the role, her wide range became apparent and the producer tapped into her burgeoning potential. "Certainly the more we pushed the envelope, the more we asked out of Lucy," he said. "The more we got, the more we liked, so the more we added to it. Now what I like about the show is the relation between Xena and Gabrielle and how we play with that relationship. How they interact. I don't think there is any show on television that has such a wide range and it comes really from the story lines. We do comedy, we do stories like the ones where the child Xena left to be raised by somebody else is killed by Gabrielle's daughter. There are shades of dark and light and everything in between."

The lion's share of the credit for the show's success Tapert gives to Lucy Lawless. "She continues to surprise me all the time. What attracted us was her performance in HERCULES. She was in the first two-hour Herc movie we shot, HERCULES AND THE AMAZON WOMEN. She had a minor role in that and then she went off and did something and wasn't available for a long time. When she came back we put her in a couple of HERCULES movies and she was just great. In one of them she played a bad girl who gave Hercules a potion that made him blind. Somebody else had originally been cast to play Xena because we had just used Lucy. When that person fell out, we slotted Lucy in and the rest is history."

Tapert was impressed by Lawless' dramatic range as filming ensued. "I actually think Lucy is just a great comedian



Husband and wife team: Lawless takes direction from series chief Rob Tapert, filming fourth season's "Paradise Found." The couple were married March 1998.

and understands jokes and how to do physical comedy, and that's very rare," said Tapert. "That she is willing to allow herself to be shown in that kind of light is interesting because in order to do comedy you've got to kind of strip yourself of all pretense. You're at your most vulnerable because you have to be ugly or stupid to make people laugh. She can go from being the Clint Eastwood bad guy to the caring mother to the best friend. That she can do the comedy and every dramatic situation she's been put into is quite a surprise."

As each new season approaches, the challenge for the producer is to find new and interesting plot lines to keep the show vibrant and audiences coming back. Noted Tapert, "Each season we ask ourselves what haven't people seen? What are we going to do with the characters? It's finding ways to make it fresh for us, for the actors, for the audience. Because if we really just did the same show week after week people would get bored of it. That's the one thing that I wanted for Herc and Xena. When you tuned in each week you wouldn't know if this was going to be funny or was it going to be dark. That was my goal, to have a show that would have a wide enough tapestry that you could laugh and cry at the same show."

As everyone at Renaissance admits, Tapert is the focal point, the visionary for all three shows. His major contribution is to work with the writers to develop stories to a point where they can be filmed and to insure the in-

tegrity of the characters. "Far more closely than they wish," he said referring to his interface with R.J. Stewart and the writing staff. "I'm involved in every beat sheet. I'm involved in every draft of the script and I give extensive notes. I work with the editing and follow through on every single episode editorially. Certainly every key one, those episodes that are going to be in the sweeps week or leading into them."

For a wacky change of pace, Stewart wrote "The Furies" episode where Xena, through one of Ares' plots, is cursed and driven mad by the Furies. As the crazy Xena, Lawless brings a new demented image to the role reminiscent, not coincidentally, of a well-known trio of frenetic comedians. "I actually wrote the Three Stooges into the script," said Stewart. "I actually said 'she goes like the Three Stooges.' What I was tapping into there was a long tradition of playing insanity on the edge of seriousness and comedy. I knew that Lucy could do it because Lucy is really good. Some people loved it and some people couldn't stand her doing the Three Stooges."

The one time travel episode, "The Xena Scrolls," moves the action into the 1940s where Lucy Lawless and Renee O'Connor play a pair of archeologists who find the lost scrolls. "We only did that one time," said Stewart. "That was a bizarre idea. That was a case where I don't think Rob was totally behind it at first but I think it worked out great. Just coinci-



"Lucy Lawless can go from being the Clint Eastwood bad guy to caring mother to best friend," said Tapert. "That she can do comedy & drama's quite a surprise."

dentally, I happened to have been down in New Zealand for that one. I get down there a couple of times a year. The production people were loving that because it was a change of pace for them. They loved the idea of using those Forties clothes and the different sets and the explosions. We did pyrotechnics so they loved that. It was obviously a big stretch for them to create a completely different production look. On the writing side, we enjoyed it too, because we were doing sort of an Indiana Jones homage."

The characters were given another twist when Xena and Hercules were costarred in an animated film released by Universal Home Video, entitled HERCULES AND XENA: THE BATTLE FOR MOUNT OLYMPUS. While Tapert and Sam Raimi were the executive producers on the feature, which marked their introduction to animation, it was made independently. "It was a good learning experience in animation for us," said Tapert, "because there is some stuff that I loved and some stuff that I just have to close my eyes for. I wish they'd let us do another because now I know what I would do differently. I would disregard any kid aspect to it. I thought they did a nice job with Xena but I think Hercules, Gabrielle and Iolus were all not very interestingly drawn. They tried something with color backgrounds that made it look cheesy, like Sixties animation. But there were some really beautiful sequences in it too. If I got to do it again, I would do a

XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS

FANTASY RENAISSANCE

Renaissance Pictures development exec Liz Friedman on giving the series a humorous touch.

By Dan Scapperotti

One of the lesser known facts about the XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS program are the hilarious disclaimers such as "No winged Harpies were harmed or sent to a fiery grave during the production of this motion picture," which are tucked away among the credit scrawls at the end of each show. Most television stations that run XENA reduce the credits to a postage stamp size and fill the screen with trailers for upcoming shows or clips from XENA. Too bad.

This clever post-production joke could only have found its genesis in the mind of a genre fan. Those disclaimers are the brain child of Liz Friedman, an executive who has worked her way up through the ranks of Renaissance Pictures.

Until recently, when she was promoted to executive in charge of development at Renaissance, Friedman was intimately involved in every show. "Up to that point I was pretty much involved with every story meeting on HERCULES and XENA, every script meeting and the hiring of directors. I looked at almost every cut of the show, worked with the writers on brainstorming stories and then working out problems. I'd talk to New Zealand about the problems or concerns they had with the scripts. When the show came back to us after it had been shot I'd work through the post-production process."

Now firmly planted on television, the company's production focus is solely for that medium. With a proven track



Xena and Gabrielle with Ted Raimi as comedy foil Joxer, facing the winged vampire legions of Bacchus in second season's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun."

record, projects in development at Renaissance tend to be genre oriented. "It's easier for us to sell something that has a Renaissance edge to it," Friedman explained. "If it has action or special effects or horror, whether or not it's specifically one of those genre pieces, it certainly makes sense to buy that from us. Just like you probably wouldn't buy an action show from the people who did FRIENDS. They're probably not going to buy a traditional three camera sitcom from us."

Renaissance certainly put New Zealand on the movie-making map. The decision to travel into the Southern Hemisphere to film the tales of Ancient Greece was driven by both economic and cinematic factors. "We filmed HERCULES down there first and then XENA went down there," said Friedman. "The two productions share some basic elements

that make it a lot more affordable to make those shows down there so there's an amortization of costs that happens. We went down there for HERCULES because the country has such a great look. It really looks like that land before time and you buy it. It's also very different from the classical, or I should say typical representation of ancient Greece as being sort of dry and barren which isn't what I think people want to look at on television. Then there was also the factor that the New Zealand dollar was very cheap when we first went there."

Friedman credits the success of XENA to the same factors that made another science fiction franchise so successful. "I'm a huge ROBOCOP fan," she said. "That's one of the greatest, smartest movies ever. One of the things I love about it is that I think it absolutely works on two levels, which is

one of the reasons I think XENA has been so successful. ROBOCOP works as just a straight action film. It also works as a very smart satire of society and corporate economy, loss of identity to technology. XENA works as a straight ahead tits-and-ass action show for lack of a more intellectual term. It's an action show but the lead is first of all a woman and second of all a woman who never apologizes for being strong. It features two women who have a very intense relationship, who do not spend all of their time talking about either their sanitary protection or their boyfriends. In this way it ends up being, compared to what is typically on television, I think, fairly subversive. I don't think we could get away with all that if it weren't working on the fact that it is entertaining. It's a good kick-ass action show."

An off-handed remark gave birth to those wacky disclaimers in the show's end credits. During a playback session of a mix midway through working on the first order of 13 HERCULES shows, Friedman turned to coordinating producer Bernie Joyce who runs the post production department and said, "I wish we could say, 'No Centaurs were harmed during the making of this motion picture.' That would be so funny." Joyce looked at her and said, "We can."

Recalled Friedman, "After that first 13 is when we had our second season of HERCULES and then we got XENA too. Then we just started doing it for every show. Bernie is great. She



Lucy Lawless as Xena, surrounded by Hera's soldiers in first season's "Prometheus." Friedman noted that Renaissance Pictures chose New Zealand as a production base for the series for its variety of locations and economic cost savings.

makes a huge contribution to the show. Bernie and I would bounce it back and forth and other people would sometimes contribute. It had to pass Bernie's funny meter first and then mine and then we kept trying to top ourselves. You do see that they get more and more outrageous as we go along."

While decisions for the disclaimers usually stay within post-production there was one that hit the cutting room floor. "The funniest one that we never got to use that I'm going to regret forever is on the episode 'Return of Callisto,'" said Friedman. "It's the one where Gabrielle marries her childhood sweetheart and Callisto kills him. In it Gabrielle marries Perdicas and they have their wedding night. So our disclaimer was, 'The producers would like to thank Gabrielle's virginity for the role it has played in our series. It will sorely be missed.' No one knows exactly what happened, but somehow the studio got told about it and they told us we had to change it. I'll always be a little sad about it."

A third season follow-up to the "Warrior... Princess... Tramp" episode where Lucy Lawless plays three different roles, was "Warrior... Priestess... Tramp." For that episode Friedman came up with "Despite another Xena look-alike

the gene pool (or rather the gene puddle) was not harmed during the making of this motion picture." The quirkiness of the show can have a slapstick edition one week followed by a serious drama the next. Which does Friedman prefer? "I prefer the darker ones," she said. "I like comedy a lot and I do love to laugh but I love dramatic storytelling. I love a good story and a good twist. I think it puts your hero in a bind. I think we've done some great comedies but by the time these things are done I've watched them four or five times and sometimes those laughs get a little thin, after about the fifth viewing."

Since becoming Sam Raimi's assistant in 1991, Friedman's unique talents have been recognized and she has moved up the corporate ladder going through a dizzying progression of titles along the way. "My first credit on one of the DARKMAN movies is something absolutely absurd like associate in charge of blue screen effects.

"In terms of the HERCULES and XENA stuff, first I was the creative associate for a couple of seasons on HERCULES, then I was an associate producer. On XENA I started as a co-producer because that was a show that I developed and helped launch. Then I became a

producer, a supervising producer and now I'm the co-executive producer."

Between the two shows, Friedman has produced nine seasons of television programming. Some shows in the grueling pace are harder than others. "The two XENAs at the end of last season 'Sacrifice I' and 'Sacrifice II' were very tough," she said, "because there were a lot of story threads that we wanted to work out. Doing two-parters demands a particular balance. Do you construct your stories as if there's one big story playing over two shows or as if each one is its own little arc? "It's an interesting exercise but it's pretty tough. 'The Bitter Suite,' our musical, was grueling. Rob Tapert put all of his blood, sweat and tears into that one. It was the production killer to end all episodes. Incredibly expensive, but it turned out really well. On most shows there are moments when you think this just isn't going to work. Not to congratulate ourselves too much, but, basically, you have five pretty smart people sitting in a room absolutely stumped and then someone comes up with something that turns it around. Someone will say, 'What if?' and, suddenly, it all falls into place. That's the beauty of TV—you just have to get it done." □



"We try to balance the show by doing a couple of dark ones then lighter ones and some straightforward adventures," noted Tapert. "I do like to keep that mix."

much harder story animated."

The cross-over factor is significant on both HERCULES and XENA. The shows film in New Zealand, where there is a much smaller casting pool than in the U.S. So, besides the Greek gods who bounce from series to series, there are other characters who have appeared on both shows. One of the most popular recurring villains of the week was played by the sultry Hudson Leick. The Cincinnati native plays Callisto, a woman from Xena's past. When she was a child Callisto saw her mother and sister killed when Xena's army destroyed their village. Now a demented warrior, Callisto is on a revenge quest

Renaissance development exec Liz Friedman began as assistant to Sam Raimi, and nursed XENA from the start.





“There’s no question that it’s a story of the love between Xena & Gabrielle,” said Tapert. “But if there’s a sexual relationship, it’s none of my business.”



Michael Hurst directs Lucy Lawless and Renee O'Connor in fourth season's "A Tale of Two Muses." The show is among the highest-rated hours in syndication.

aimed at the Warrior Princess.

Callisto was the brainchild of R. J. Stewart, a producer who heads up the show. “I was thinking of the terrible things Xena had done,” said Stewart. “In fact in the back story that we set for her, she’s almost a war criminal. I thought she got off awfully easy. Suddenly she decides to do good. I thought there must be somebody out there who suffered from her evil days and who wants revenge. Then I said to myself, ‘what if that one is a beautiful woman who in some ways is emulating Xena, but in a dark way,’ and that’s how Callisto evolved. Sort of a piece of her past come back to haunt her. Then, of course, casting Hudson Leick was the other half of that equation.”

“Hudson is great,” said Tapert. “I like her a lot. We had a casting call and as soon as Hudson walked in the room we knew she was the one. But now she’s gone. We killed her off in ‘The Sacrifice II.’ She’s gone for good.”

The veritable Bruce Campbell who had starred in Tapert’s EVIL DEAD trilogy, plays Autolycus, the thief. The character originated on HERCULES in the second season opener, “King of Thieves,” but has made many return engagements on XENA, starting with “Royal Couple of Thieves.” When a group of warlords get together to bid on a chest containing a weapon that may mean world domination, Xena and Autolycus team up to steal the treasure. “Bruce and I go back 20

years,” Tapert explained. “I think Bruce is the modern-day equivalent of Cary Grant and nobody really uses him in that role or that part.”

Another of the comedy relief characters that populate ancient Greece is Joxer, the Mighty. Ted Raimi, Renaissance partner Sam’s younger brother, plays Joxer, whose swagger and bravado over-compensate for his lack of any martial arts skills. Dressed in Grecian retro armor, Joxer frequently crosses paths with Xena and Gabrielle. The vagabond warrior has an unrequited romantic interest in Gabrielle. “I’ve known Ted even longer than I’ve known Bruce,” said Tapert. “In ‘Callisto’ we wanted a kind of bumbling, comedy character and I thought of Ted. I showed some film of him to the guys and they loved him. He’s great in it. He likes Gabrielle, but I’m not sure she’s all that interested.”

Other supporting characters include Salmoneus, played by American actor Robert Trebor, who has appeared in 25 episodes of HERCULES and XENA, and Ares, the God of War. Ares, played by a New Zealand musician, Kevin Smith, has had a love-hate relationship with Xena since she thwarted his plans for Darphus in “Unchained Heart.” He loves her. She hates him. He pops up now and again with a new plan to a) seduce the Warrior Princess, or b) destroy her out of spite.

Since Lucy Lawless is the center of attention on the program, her schedule is as rugged as anyone’s on television. There

are times during the shooting schedule when, because of other business commitments or industry conventions, Lawless isn’t available. She attends NAPTE (National Association of Programming Television Executives) annually, a television sales convention for syndicators. “We generally have to do at least one episode that doesn’t have Lucy in it in order to shoot in that time period,” Tapert explained. “If we know that there are going to be some really difficult episodes, we try to design one or two to give Lucy a little bit of time off because she is often in almost every single shot, like the two openers for this season. That gets tough on a regular TV schedule.”

“I believe that Lucy has the hardest schedule of anybody working on television. Just by the nature of the show. I know David Duchovny would argue that he’s got the longest schedule, but I think both of them have those bragging rights. He doesn’t, however, have the physical demands of XENA, but he does have the hours.”

Almost from the show’s premiere, lesbian groups were drawn to the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. As the thread of that bond stretched out, the writers pushed the boundaries solidifying the feelings the pair have for each other. Even Ares, the God of War is bewildered by the relationship. Pointing to Gabrielle in one episode, he says to Xena, “I still don’t see what you see in her.” “We’re not really playing to that audience,” said Tapert diplo-

matically. “There is a love relationship, meaning there’s no question that Xena and Gabrielle love each other and are willing to lie down their lives for each other, but I don’t necessarily want to say that they have a sexual relationship either. There’s no question that it is a story of the love between two characters, but if there’s a sexual relationship between them, it’s none of my business.”

Since syndicated television doesn’t have the censorial roadblocks that often plague network productions, XENA depends more on a system of self-policing to maintain standards that would be acceptable both to their affiliates and the brass at Universal Television, the company that distributes the show. “The Gauntlet” episode is a case in point. Betrayed by her troops, Xena must suffer the ravages of running the gauntlet, a path lined with warriors who pummel her as she runs through their ranks.

“That scene was trimmed and it was trimmed by me,” said Tapert emphatically. “No one was pushing me. It was one of the few times that I saw something that we had shot that was too strong even though my hand was all over that episode. I pushed the director and the writer to write this because they wanted to redeem the character. They wanted her to go off with the baby at the end and I said, ‘You guys are out of your fucking minds.’ We did shoot it. It was a really rough sequence and I did trim it back and I tried to play it with very low sound effects and make the music counterpoint to the violence. Make it operatic in its feel and tone.”

Are there any themes that are taboo for XENA? “Not as long as everything’s handled intelligently,” said Tapert. “There are no standards and practices that we have to show anything to. It’s just what the advertisers are willing to have their product attached to. There is no real board. It’s not like a network where there’s Standards and Practices. This is first-run syndicated television. They don’t have the same—I want to say restraints, but that’s not the right word—the same censorship problems. We get away with more than network television.” □

XENA

WARRIOR PRINCESS

APHRODITE

Alexandra Tydings plays mythology a la Mae West.

By James G. Boutilier

XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS and its inspiration, HERCULES: THE LEGENDARY JOURNEY have made a hit with swashbuckling adventure, witty humor and beautiful, scantily-clad women. Bridging both series with seductive whimsy has been Alexandra Tydings as the beautiful but prissy Goddess of Love, Aphrodite.

Aphrodite, played with shadings of Mae West, has been a welcome addition to XENA's heroic pantheon. She's a goddess in a bustier; the immortal half-sister of Hercules; sister of Ares the god of war and general tick in the trousers of any male—immortal or not—who crosses her path.

Noted Tydings, "After I did some research I found out that in a lot of the stories she could be very cruel. And then obviously there was the humor of

the script and the anachronistic speech that she uses. That was fun to toy with. I got together with my acting teacher, who coaches me on everything I do and we played with the humor and threw some Mae West in there."

The show's revealing outfits didn't phase the actress, though she admitted, "When I get up at five o'clock in the morning and show up on the set, the last thing I want to do is put on a wig and a Wonderbra, but that's my job.

"I won't make apologies for Aphrodite," said Tydings. "There's nothing wrong with having sexy women portrayed in our culture, it's just what we do with them that gets dangerous. That kind of thing can sell show. People like to look at women's bodies. But the show doesn't do violence to women. It's not exploitative in that way."

It is a pretty exhausting transformation the actress goes

Have Wonderbra will travel: Tydings in third season XENA show "Fins, Femmes and Gems," playing Ares' sister with loopy Valley Girl speech and demeanor.



Tydings as Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love in HERCULES fourth season episode "One Fowl Day," borrowing moves from the legendary Mae West.

through to become her infamous other self. "That's where the work comes in. Getting up every morning as early as 3:30, driving out to the set, sitting in the makeup chair. I actually don't have it as bad as the makeup girls, because they have to get there before I do, and they have to go right to work. I can sit there and zone out and have a cup of tea."

Tydings noted that her role of Aphrodite amounts to a "transformation. Physically it's enormous. I've run into people from the crew, who are looking at me all day long, and they don't recognize me. I'm not a goddess, certainly not Aphrodite."

Tydings termed the roles exposure difficult and not always fun. I wear a robe on set, except sometimes when it's really super hot. Sometimes the makeup girls have to come over and

powder my chest. That's always fun with all the gaffers standing right there!" Tydings laughed, "But they are a respectful group and a respectful production."

The ironic thing about Aphrodite is that, for a Love goddess, she is remarkably antagonistic, and in fact, in some episodes is the harbinger of wars—usually because of her disregard for the consequences her playing with mortal men causes, as in the XENA episode, "For Him the Bells Toll."

"I never think of her as a bad guy, because I have to empathize with her" said Tydings, "and try to justify it all to myself. She wrecks havoc, but I don't think she means anything by it. Mostly she is just having fun. She can be petty and jealous, and then she just has to do what she has to do to get whatever she thinks she has to have." □



CARNIVAL OF SOULS

The Remake

Wes Craven offers a color update of the creepy '62 shocker.

By Mitch Persons

When J. Michael McCarthy, the young and dynamic producer/writer/director of the underground films *THE SORE LOSERS*, and *TEENAGE TUPLELO*, was told that Wes Craven and Trimark Pictures was about to embark on a remake of the film *CARNIVAL OF SOULS*, he asked, "Why remake that one?"

Good question. The original 1962 *CARNIVAL OF SOULS* was the disturbing fable of Mary Henry (Candace Hilligoss), a woman who has apparently survived an accidental drowning. Though physically unharmed, Mary finds herself in a strange limbo state. She moves to a new locale and a new job, but is apathetic to the point of catatonia. Eager for companionship, she nevertheless spurns the advances of her lecherous next-door neighbor

(Sidney Berger) The only element in her life strong enough to elicit an emotional response is the compulsion she feels to visit an abandoned carnival building on the outskirts of the town. She is constantly haunted by the spectre of a pasty-faced ghoul (played by the producer/director, the late Herk Harvey). Drawn by the ghoul to the carnival building, Mary discovers that she did not survive the car wreck after all. She is joined by other dead souls in a dance of death.

In the almost 40 years since *CARNIVAL OF SOULS* debuted on the lower half of midwestern drive-in double bills, it has become something of a genre classic. Its disconcerting use of the horror element has served as an inspiration for such filmmakers as George Romero, Martin Scorsese, and even Wes Craven himself. Mike McCarthy's reaction to hearing that



State-of-the-art makeup effects of carnival freaks beef-up the horror of Trimark Pictures' remake, which is due to hit cable and video outlets later this year.



a remake was in the works was typical. CARNIVAL'S many admirers view the making of a new version as being akin to Ted Turner wanting to colorize CITIZEN KANE (something, thank goodness, that he never did).

Why then, do this new rendering at all? It's quite true that CARNIVAL OF SOULS, despite some technical flaws, stands up very well on its own. Peter Soby, Jr., who, along with Michael Meltzer, Lisa Harrison, and Phil Goldfine, has a hand in producing the film, talks about what led him to go the remake route.

"About three years ago, I met Candace Hilligoss," said Soby. "I had already seen CARNIVAL on some late-night TV. It had been one of those movies whose images really stuck with me. I loved it. I had an idea in my head that I could pay tribute to the movie by doing a remake, but didn't know if the rights were available. Through Candace, I got to know Herk Harvey, and Herk's screenwriter, John Clifford. Herk and John had been cheated by Hollywood with the distribution of CARNIVAL. Companies that were supposed to have paid them went supposedly bankrupt, and John and Herk never got paid their percentages. They were pretty disgusted with the way things turned out. Eventually, Herk, John and I got to be good friends, and when I offered to buy the film from Herk outright, he jumped at the chance."

"I loved Herk's film too," chimed-in Michael Meltzer, "and with this remake, we wanted to remain true to his themes. But we also did something else: we added our own level of characters and storyline that took, and does take, the story beyond the initial one. Bobbie Phillips plays the Mary Henry character, but we've renamed her Alex Grant. Alex now has a younger sister, Sandra, played by Shawnee Smith. And there is an extended flashback sequence of a horrifying incident involving the mother of Sandra and Alex that adds considerable depth to Alex's character." Comedian Larry Miller, in a dramatic change of pace, plays a character from Alex's past, as well as a supernatural

Carnival Clown

LARRY MILLER

The comedian on his dark horror turn as the celebrated "clown at midnight."

By Mitch Persons

Larry Miller has made people laugh in many different ways. He is a brilliant stand-up comic. His portrayal of the sycophantic dress-shop proprietor in PRETTY WOMAN, and the hyper school administrator in the latest THE NUTTY PROFESSOR, are considered classic comedy roles. His annoying, if loveable, characterizations have graced countless TV sitcoms. It is odd, then, to hear that this veteran comic actor has been cast as a sadistic sociopath in the remake of CARNIVAL OF SOULS.

Sitting in a folding chair, his face covered in greasy clown makeup, his attitude relaxed and friendly, it is not easy to imagine Miller essaying this straight dramatic part.

"It is true," he said affably, "that I'm known for doing funny things, or trying to do funny things, either as a stand-up comic, or in the 15 movies I've been in, or the TV shows where I've played humorously irritating men. My last film, FOR RICHER OR POORER, was a comedy, and I will probably do some more comic turns after I finish CARNIVAL. But even though I'm known mostly for comedy, I'm still an actor, and I like to take on a challenge every once in a while.

"The character that I play, Louis, is a challenge and a half! I mean, this is a very, very bad guy. If you list the five worst things you can think of as crimes, this guy has done them all. He has no redeeming quali-



Miller as Louis, the sadistic sociopath and child molester who haunts the nightmares of Alex Grant.

ties. None. It'll be very interesting to see how audiences react to him because traditionally, bad guys can be enjoyed if they don't cross a certain line.

"Jack Nicholson was fabulous and hysterical in BATMAN as The Joker. There was a certain detachment there, so you could really laugh at him and what he was doing. It was a cartoon. And then there was Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter in THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS—he was a horrible, sick murderer, but he was also witty and charming. Louis is, in some ways, like Nicholson's Joker and Hopkins' Lecter. Louis has something of a sense of humor, but it's a bawdy, ribald kind of humor, but only of the darkest kind. Unlike Nicholson and Hopkins, there's no pulling back, no detachment. This man is pure evil.

"That's the whole thing with this slimeball. When I was first thinking about the motivations for Louis, someone suggested to me that 'maybe this guy was an abused child, which is why

he is an abuser himself.' That's what's current in our society right now—there has to be a rationale for every kind of erratic behavior. I don't buy into that. A fellow comic I know, Carmen Quinn, does a wonderful line in his act. He says, 'After you've strangled your seventh person, it's got to be more than a bad school lunch program.' That's a very darkly funny way of looking at what I consider the syndrome of just explaining, rationalizing things. With Louis, he's not paranoid, or schizo-

phrenic, or even troubled. He's very clear. He's the happiest guy in the world. He absolutely loves what he's doing.

"In a way, it's been off-setting playing this man. I've had to do some real soul-searching. I have a wife and kid, and like most family men, I like to think of myself as a good person. Now, Louis doesn't see himself as evil. In his own way, he's as normal as I am. It took a long time for me to work that delusion of normalcy into his characterization.

"But even with that. I would have second thoughts about my own family, and especially my young son, seeing CARNIVAL. His being exposed to a monster like Louis, even on film, is a disturbing idea to me, because I believe that in real life, people like Louis should be dispatched. I feel like saying to him and his kind, 'You can't be here any more: you can't be with the rest of us.' Unfortunately, the Louises of this world are out there, and probably will be for a long time to come." □

figure in clown's makeup who keeps dogging her at every turn.

"One thing about the first film," noted Soby, "was the fact that you really didn't know anything about Mary Henry, except that she was a cold person. Here, we've definitely given her counterpart more levels to work and deal with. Alex is tough, but we know why she's tough. When people like Alex experience trauma at a young age, they become hardened. I don't mean hardened in the sense of cold, the way Mary Henry was cold, but tough and hardened and very protective of the ones she loves, like her sister, and the memory of her mother. To put it simply, we've updated this story to include some pretty heavy contemporary issues."

The updating was accomplished by a 32-year-old film auteur named Adam Grossman. Fresh from directing *SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK AGAIN*, and co-authoring *SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK FOR MORE*, (both for Trimark) Grossman is the director and scriptwriter for the new *CARNIVAL OF SOULS*.

"The two films are really not alike at all," said Grossman. "The only thing that remains the same is the central idea: it's the story of a woman who gets into a car accident, survives it, tries to get back to her normal life, but is haunted by these horrible visions until she realizes that she has been dead the whole time. That's the only way the two movies are similar. Everything else in our *CARNIVAL* is completely new.

"I've also tried to increase the feeling of dread that the first movie generated. My favorite scary movies, and I think Wes Craven would agree with this, are the ones that don't necessarily put the slash and gore across the screen, but put the fear inside your mind."

"Our film," added Michael Meltzer, "is very cerebral. There's virtually no blood. It does have scares to it, but, as Adam says, it's not your typical slasher type of horror movie where you see heads falling off, or zombies walking. We do have makeup effects that, hopefully, will startle the audience, and give them the thrills and the

"Our film is very cerebral," said Meltzer. "There's virtually no blood. It does have scares in it, but...it's not your typical slasher type of horror movie."



Miller's clown takes the role of the original's Dark Man. Below: Bobbie Phillips as the haunted Alex Grant, recreating the original's notorious bathtub scene.



chills that there should be in a suspense thriller, but it is definitely not your buckets-of-blood movie."

"We've got all the visual elements of a thriller," noted Peter Soby, "we've got the stunts, the CGI effects, but a great deal of it is very subtle. You might see makeup on someone and it might just be enough that you notice what it

is. A lot of our vision was to create something that was a little bit off-center. I think this is something that Adam has established with some of the camera angles; they're very much like some of the shots in *VERTIGO* or *THE BIRDS*, creepy, suspenseful, yet thought-provoking."

"Creating that creepy, what's-happening-now? feel-

ing," said Grossman, "is not something that you just step onto a soundstage and automatically start doing. It's something that you have to grow into. That's why I admire people like Alfred Hitchcock. After making so many suspenseful films, he knew exactly where his audience was. He was able to put his finger on their fear button. But it's not good enough to just imitate what Hitchcock did. You have to find your own way to the fear button. I've directed some thrillers before. I hope that with *CARNIVAL*, I've found my own way to tap into the audience's uneasiness."

Soby and Meltzer apparently have enough confidence in Grossman's abilities to start a mammoth advertising and merchandising program. "We're planning a video re-release of the first film," Soby said. "And maybe hitting some midnight markets and theaters with a digitally remastered version."

"We also plan," continued Meltzer, "to have a special edition video that differentiates from some of those pirated videos that invariably get circulated. We'll be having interviews with some of the original people involved—and perhaps even talks with George Romero and Wes Craven, and we might even do a DVD. There was a comic book, graphic novel, and even trading cards that we hope to locate.

"There'll be a CD with the organ music. If things go well, we we might try some of these marketing approaches with our film. There's going to be a lot of good *CARNIVAL OF SOULS* action out there!"

"With all this talk about the two films being so different," Soby chuckled, "You might ask 'why all the hoopla about the original?' It's inevitable that people are going to be comparing our film to the Herk Harvey version. But we embrace that, because we have a good film on our hands. When people are exposed to Herk's *CARNIVAL* and then view ours, they will see that ours stands up to the comparison. I also believe the new *CARNIVAL OF SOULS* will pay good homage to the original, which was, after all, our intention right from the start." □

Carnival Original

SIDNEY BERGER

The drama professor on his remake cameo and his unforgettable role in the '62 b&w horror classic.

By Mitch Persons

The 1962 *CARNIVAL OF SOULS* is filled with memorable performances. There is of course, the extraordinary acting of Candace Hilligoss, who plays the lead, Mary Henry. Then there are the supporting players: The late director Herk Harvey does a marvelously creepy turn as the ubiquitous ghoul; Stanley Leavitt is outstanding as a stuffy pseudo-psychiatrist; Frances Feist, as Mary Henry's landlady, is a bundle of flustered nerves and motherly concern. Another performance, however, lingers in the minds of audiences almost as much as that of Candace Hilligoss: Sidney Berger's portrayal of John Linden, Mary's lecherous, slang-slinging neighbor.

Berger has been the Director of Theater at the University of Houston, Texas, school of Theater for the past 27 years. Talking to this erudite, articulate man, it seems a marvel that he ever landed the part of the libido-dominated Linden at all.

"Well, I didn't really land the role of John Linden," said Berger. "In the early '60s, I was in graduate school at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. There was a documentary and educational film studio nearby named Centron Films. Herk Harvey worked as a director there. I would do a turn as an actor for him from time to time. That's how we got to know each other. Later, when Herk was casting *CARNIVAL OF SOULS*, he thought of me for the role of Linden."

Over the years, Berger's interpretation of Linden has been called everything from "creepy" to "slimy." "I like the label that Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times* came up with," laughed Berger. "He said that my portrayal was 'the definitive study of the nerd in lust.'"

Whatever the labeling, in the four decades since *CARNIVAL* was first shown, Berger's characterization has been the subject of some controversy. Rumor has it that Herk Harvey was dissatisfied



Berger with Candace Hilligoss, "the definitive study of the nerd in lust," noted Roger Ebert. Inset: Berger pops up in the remake.



with the part (though not with Berger's performance.) Harvey was supposed to have been quoted as saying that if he had anything to do over again in the film, it would be to change John Linden into a more sympathetic individual.

"I have no idea where that rumor came from," Berger stated. "Herk and I spoke many, many times after the film was made, up until the years when he was, unfortunately, very ill, and he never mentioned any regret about the Linden character. If such a thing was in his mind, I think he would have told me without any problem, because he and I had a very good relationship.

"However, if he had said something like that, I think I would have been able to understand it. John Linden was sort of a one-dimensional, obnoxiously horny guy. I'm not patting myself on the back, but I found myself doing everything I could to give him as human a context as possible, to make him a little more believable. He was, after all, the second lead in the film. Perhaps Herk and I could have worked with his character a little more, and given him a bit more dimension than was seen on the screen. It probably would have helped the initial reaction to the movie.

"The strange thing is, even with Linden being as flatly motivated as he was, people

have consistently talked to me about him. I've had show business professionals come up to me and ask, 'Didn't you play that nasty guy in that movie about the dead girl who didn't know she was dead?'

"When I played Linden, it never occurred to me that *CARNIVAL* would last beyond its initial showings; none of the people involved thought that it had any kind of future. The life the film has taken on since then is absolutely mind-boggling to me. It's this obscure, small, black-and-white movie, and people just adore it. I have no idea, to this moment, as to

why it has the effect it's had.

"*CARNIVAL* had such a long life that in 1990, we did a re-screening of it in the town where it was filmed, Lawrence, Kansas. Candace [Hilligoss] came, and I was there. We were about the only ones left. A number of the other people had passed away during the intervening years, but *People* magazine showed up, and they asked us if we would go to the various locations in Lawrence where we shot some of the film, and re-do those scenes for their cameras. We did it, and it was spooky!

"The really spooky thing, though, was playing a small part in Wes Craven's remake. One day [producer] Peter Soby called me and asked whether I would be willing to come out to L.A. and do a cameo. I didn't know there was going to be a remake, but once I found out, I thought it would be a hoot to be in it. I played the role of an L.A. cop. The scene was the one in which they pull the car out of the water with the girl's body still in it. That was the scene I remember most from the original film, and I was suddenly seeing something alive that I thought was history some 40 years ago. There it was, happening again right in front of me, and I was playing someone else from a totally different perspective. Even though

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HONEY, I — SHRUNK — THE KIDS

THE TV SHOW

Ed Naha makes genre parody an art.

By Dan Scapperotti

Abandoned army barracks in Calgary, Canada have been converted into a pair of sound stages and production offices for Disney Television's version of the 1989 hit film *HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS*. Peter Scolari steps into the shoes filled theatrically by Rick Moranis as wacky scientist Wayne Szalinski, a genius whose wild inventions often have unexpected, and undesired side effects. Joining Scolari as wife Diane, is genre veteran Barbara Alyn Woods. Rounding out the Szalinski clan are daughter Amy, played by Hillary Tuck, and Thomas Dekker as son Nick.

An addition to the cast in the second season is George Buza who had played Doubar on *THE ADVENTURES OF SINBAD*. Although he grew up in Cleveland, Doubar is a Canadian citizen. The 6'4" actor was cast as Jake McKenna, the town's police chief and frequently the victim of Wayne's antics.

The South African-based *ADVENTURES OF SINBAD*

had just been renewed for a third season and creator Ed Naha was thrilled. But suddenly the magic carpet was pulled out from under him when a corporate takeover reversed the decision and *SINBAD* bit the dust. The Fates, however, smiled on Naha when he received a call from Jonathan Hackett, a producer on *Sinbad's* first season now attached to *HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS*. The producer explained that plans were being laid to make some changes to the show for its second season. The tone of the

show would change to include more elements of science fiction and fantasy.

Naha, who had co-written the screenplay for the original film seemed to be heading for a reunion with his characters. He met with Leslie Belzberg who, along with John Landis, acts as executive producer for the show, and producer Bert Swartz. "Once they got over the shock of seeing me with my pony tail and *SOUTH PARK* t-shirt we hit it off," said Naha.

A fan of classic slapstick comedy, Naha has tried to bring

that level of humor to the new season. "Peter Scolari is just an amazing physical comedian," said Naha. "I love physical comedy, the Laurel and Hardy and Hal Roach stuff, and he loves Buster Keaton. So what we tried to do this year was to change the show into an hour comedy. The show's first season was mostly situation comedy. There wasn't a heck of a lot of action. It skewed more towards verbal humor. This year we just opened it up. It's a lot more kinetic. It's a lot crazier."

The producers felt that the first season, although an hour-long show, still played like a half-hour program. For the second season they wanted it to play like a mini-movie. Explaining the structure the new season would follow Naha noted, "You have a sense of momentum where the verbal, the physical humor and the science fiction fantasy plot lines are all intertwined. They all move forward. The biggest challenge is to keep things moving. We are the only hour-long comedy adventure series in syndication. Once you boost up the action and get the plot up and running



Hillary Tuck, Barbara Alyn Woods and Thomas Dekker face the "Killer Carrot."

Series co-executive producer and writing staff supervisor Ed Naha with Peter Scolari, who plays madcap inventor Wayne Szalinski in the movie spin-off.





HONEY, I - SHRUNK THE - AUDIENCE

Disney extends the franchise with a 3-D theme park attraction at EPCOT.

By Ross Plesset

The mythology of HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS has been applied to yet another medium: HONEY I SHRUNK THE AUDIENCE, a special venue 3-D film for Disney's theme parks. The show is set in Wayne Szalinsky's laboratory where his far-out inventions go awry; a mouse is replicated thousands of times, Szalinsky goes out of control in a hover pod and of course the audience shrinks.

Although the film premiered at EPCOT in 1994 and Disneyland in 1998, pre-production started before HONEY, I BLEW UP THE KID! (1992) was released. "It was time to create a new 3-D show for Kodak and we came up with a huge list of concepts," recalled Tom Fitzgerald of Walt Disney Imagineering. "When we reviewed them with Michael [Eisner], there was one that stood out amongst all the others. What sold it was the title: HONEY, I SHRUNK THE AUDIENCE. Anybody who we said that title to smiled and reacted...Being able to build off of our mythologies is very important to us. Our shows are very short and when the audience already knows the characters and knows what might happen to them, it reduces exposition time."

Before they got the green light from Eisner, the Walt Disney Imagineers had to convince him with test footage that the audience would believe they had shrunk.



Eric Idle as Dr. Nigel Channing with Nick Szalinski (Robert Oliveri), replicating thousands of mice for his snake Gigabyte. Disneyland opened the film last year.

The film re-united the cast of HONEY, I BLEW UP THE KID! which was not without its problems. "We only had Rick Moranis for two days and the shoot was about two weeks," explained director Randal Kleiser. "That's when I got the idea of having him be miniaturized on his hover pod, which was mostly CGI with his voice over it. The only times he worked was standing in the hover pod in front of a blue screen, looking into the theater with a magnifying glass and coming down the ramp at the end."

Audiences are reacting strongly to the 3-D gags. Arguably, they are comparable to MAGIC JOURNEYS, one of Disney's best 3-D films.

Besides making effective use of 3-D, HONEY, I SHRUNK THE AUDIENCE has many physical effects. At one point thousands of mice seemingly flood out of the screen and brush the audience's legs. Show writer Steven Spiegel explained: "MUPPET-VISION 3-D had come out and we got great responses from the audience getting wet in it. We thought 'How can we push that a little farther?' That's what led us to think of the mice effect in the theater. 'Honey' was the first time we invaded [guests] personal space beyond just getting them wet."

This fall HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS gets implemented in still another medium: a dark ride at EPCOT. □

Naha infused the sitcom with action.

then you're moving at a gallop. All the cast members have really been up for it."

This year's season opener, "Honey, It's Quarkzilla," had Wayne, under pressure from his boss to create a formula for growing giant vegetables, accidentally bringing forth a race of carnivorous carrots, tomatoes and other delectable veggies with a bite. Unfortunately, the family pet dog, Quark, is also introduced to the formula. "It's almost like our homage to Toho films of the '60s and '50s," said Naha. "The pet dog accidentally eats some of these giant vegetables and becomes Quarkzilla. It's a guy in a suit like the original Toho things were."

Dinosaurs, flying men, threats from outer space and even a good old-fashioned slasher film villain are on tap for other shows this season. "In our Halloween show called 'Honey, Let's Trick or Treat,'" which Stuart Gordon directed," Naha explained, "we have urban legends brought to life. So we have alligators in sewers and we have Michael Berryman from THE HILLS HAVE

HONEY, I — SHRUNK — THE KIDS

BARBARA ALYN WOODS

Savoring her role as an action adventure heroine.

By Dan Scapperotti

Genre vet Barbara Alyn Woods likes the new action-adventure direction of *HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS*. In one second season show, Woods does an Indiana Jones-type stunt, diving onto a truck from a moving bicycle. In another she plays a warrior princess doing battle with a slasher killer. Noted Woods on the set, "*HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS* is fun because I get to play so many different roles."

In 1990 Woods made her feature film debut in a trio of genre films: *REPOSSESSED*, *CIRCUITRY MAN* and *TERROR WITHIN II*. Earlier TV roles included a guest shot on *STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION*. "I played Kareen Briannon who fell in love with Data," said Woods of her *STAR TREK* experience. "It was my first LA professional gig and maybe one of my favorites of all time. It was my first interaction with 'real actors.' I was thrilled and after the first day I knew that I wanted to do this for a long, long time. It was very exciting."

When Woods landed the plum role of Diane Szalinski in Disney's television series *HONEY I SHRUNK THE KIDS* she moved to Canada where the show is filmed. "I'll live in Canada as long as the show's running," she said. "Hillary Tuck, who plays my daughter, and I have a house together. A beautiful hundred-year-old house and we're shackled up together."

Diane is no sitcom mom from the '50s, or even your typical Disney housewife and mother. She is a self-contained little dynamo who not only holds an outside job and manages household affairs, but must run interference for the occasional disastrous effects of husband Wayne's inventions. She is also a woman with sexual needs as evidenced in the first show of the new season where she has to remind Wayne, who is trying to reverse a formula that has produced a strain of carnivorous vegetables, that that night they were scheduled for some bedroom activities.

As an actress, Woods' main concern is that her character is more complex than the



Woods in action, dressed-up like you-know-who for the show's Halloween episode "Holographic Mayhem."

run of the mill TV mom. As Diane Szalinski she has found a part that caters to her search for a multifaceted role. "It's all about making a character well-rounded," she said. "It's really important to me that the character has different shades and dimensions. I don't want to say anything bad about the movie, so I won't. When I accepted the role it was understood that she has her own life. She's independent. She's a working woman. She's a lawyer. She has her career. She's more human. She's almost superhuman."

"I receive a lot of letters from women which is thrilling for me. They say, 'Thank you for depicting women this way. This is what I would love to achieve in my life.' I like to be a role model."

"It's definitely an actor's dream role. Every time we pick up a script we have no idea what to expect. Anything is possible. It's really been quite an experience. They've definitely lived up to their promise

to make her well-rounded. As long as that continues I'm very happy."

The producers caught wind of Woods days as a night club singer back in Chicago and have incorporated that into one of the shows. "I was a torch singer in 'Honey, It's Doomsday.' Like Michelle Pfeiffer in *THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS*, I'm stretched out on top of a baby grand with a smoky background. I'm wearing a red velvet dress with the microphone. The whole deal. I sing 'Hey Big Spender.' You wouldn't believe how the storylines run together after a while. That was my method of delaying this character, General Bull Lytton Jennings, from destroying the world."

In "Honey, I'm Rooting for the Home Team," Woods takes dancing lessons. "I was a belly dancer," she said. "I took lessons from a world famous belly dancer. It was the episode that Peter Scolaro directed which was about our son Nick's antics on the local kid's baseball team. It was just something that Diane decides to do in her free time, take belly dancing lessons. Then there is a little recital at the end."

In the show's Halloween episode, "Honey, Let's Trick or Treat," directed by Stuart Gordon, Woods gets to take a turn as a Warrior Princess. "Diane chooses to dress up as Xena because it's Halloween," said Woods. The Szalinski Scan-O-Caster (pat. pending) is another of Wayne's hairbrained inventions designed to scan stories and project them as 4D images. Diane thinks the idea too scary and Wayne locks the device away. Unfortunately, it scans the Big Book of Urban Myths and soon the town is invaded by everything from a giant alligator in the sewers to the legendary killer with a hooked hand.

"I learned how to broad sword," Woods said proudly. "I get to fight Michael Berryman [*THE HILLS HAVE EYES*] which is a thrill. I'm a big fan of his. I had hours of training and the two of us really, really went at it. We had no doubles and we were actually sword fighting. It was a lot of fun. I had a broad sword and he had a hook. It was pretty thrilling." □

CREATOR ED NAHA

"I love physical comedy, the Laurel and Hardy and Hal Roach stuff and [Peter Scolari] loves Buster Keaton.... This year we just opened it up. It's a lot more kinetic."

EYES. He plays a guy with a hook for a hand that stalks lovers lane. In another show we have a take off on the asteroid going to hit the earth movies.

"We have a spoof of the old rocketman Republic serials where Wayne decides he is going to emulate his childhood hero Captain Rocket. So, to combat crime, he builds himself a costume that doesn't always work right all of the time. We're doing things that are fun and goofy."

Naha was given the title co-executive producer, but he is also the head writer for the show. Among his writing staff is Craig Volk who had worked on SINBAD. Naha himself has penned three of the first 12 episodes including "Honey, It's Quarkzilla," "Honey, I'm King of the Rocket Guys" and "Honey, It's Doomsday."

The misadventures of the Szalinski clan call for an array of gadgets that Wayne has tinkered together. Among these are the classic Shrink-ray which is still operable, and size does count; the Neuron Nudger allows people to share memories; The Felon Repeller and Accident Neutralizer, F.R.A.N. for short is an artificial intelligence home security device that develops a love for its inventor, Wayne. One can bounce back in time with the Time Hopper. One drawback. If you stay too long you turn to stone and explode. The Thinky Ring was invented to increase the wearer's brain power, unfortunately it also gives them "an overwhelming sense of superiority, arrogance, and a contempt for humankind."

The Gizmo Shop is responsible for turning the script's daffy devices into reality, or at least the semblance of something that looks like it might work. The eight full time members of the shop, a team headed by coordi-

nator Doug Blackie, have been designated the "Gizmo Guys." The shop is a jumble of metal and wires, junk, actually, that can be tinkered into a Wayne Szalinski invention.

"We have a lot of great gizmos this year," said Naha. "We're trying to get back to the tone of the original film and have new inventions every week."

For the last two years on SINBAD Naha has been able to play with Ray Harryhausen and Errol Flynn type action adventures with traces of verbal humor. Now he is able to deal with physical humor as well, thanks to Peter Scolari's mastery of that craft. "I can't say enough about Peter," said Naha. "This guy is just remarkable. Because he's so good at verbal humor and instinctively gets the physical humor, the most fun I'm having this year is trying to design outrageous sight gags that are part of the story."

Producer Leslie Belzberg is from Calgary and realized the benefits of filming in the Alberta Province where LONESOME DOVE was shot. "There's a lot of interesting scenery there," said Naha. "For instance, in the prehistoric episode we needed a bog pit. Our production designer found one within commuting distance

The Szalinskis and police chief foil George Buza win the bout in second season's "Honey, I'm Wrestling With A Problem," syndicated in major markets.



Thomas Dekker as Nick Szalinski in Naha's second season spoof of LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, infusing the series with more action and special effects.

from the studio. You have a small town feel when we go for exterior shots. The production design is tremendous. They've now created the front and back of the Szalinski house on a sound stage. They've taken over part of the back lot, as well as a real house that serves as the McKenna's home." Post production and visual effects for

the series, however, are done in California and the writers have their offices there so they can screen dailies.

For the ardent science fiction fans Naha has peppered the episodes with references to genre icons. In "Honey, It's Doomsday" he pays homage to those asteroid movies of last summer when Wayne travels to a threatening planetoid. "He has sort of a time machine," said Naha, "so he modifies the time machine and puts the guts of it into a phone booth and that's his, for lack of a better word, his Star Trekian transporter device. So on the one hand we get to do a little wink at STAR TREK and on the other we get to wink at DR. WHO and the Tardis. There are enough references in the show that if you're into science fiction and fantasy you're going to pick up on it. In one script when Wayne sees the T Rex his exclamation is 'Holy Harryhausen!'" □

STAR TREK DEEP SPACE NINE

VIC FONTAINE

Crooner James Darren on finding new life as a holographic hit on the final frontier.

By Anna L. Kaplan

Hard at work on set filming the episode "It's Only a Paper Moon," James Darren talked about the beginning of his relationship with DS9. He laughed, "When I was first asked about playing a character on DEEP SPACE NINE, when they told me the character was a singer, I told them I didn't want to do it. It's kind of on the nose. I didn't want to meet with the producers. Then they asked me if I would at least have the courtesy to read the script, and I did. It was such a wonderful script that I was begging them to do it. Thank God, they still wanted me.

The character is a terrific idea, especially in contrast to this atmosphere here, and to all the other characters, the aliens, I call them. It's been fun."

Darren's character, Vic Fontaine, was first introduced in the sixth season episode "His Way," written by executive producer Ira Behr and co-executive producer Hans Beimler. Vic is a self-aware, holographic singer whose program parallels Las Vegas in the 1960's. During "His Way," Vic helped Odo (Rene Auberjonois) express his love for Kira (Nana Visitor).

Darren enjoyed everything about "His Way." He noted, "I think that show had magic. All those things that Ira and Hans



Darren as Fontaine, a sentient holosuite entertainer on the station, who debuted in last season's "His Way," dispensing advice to lovelorn Odo (Rene Auberjonois).

wrote, 'Hi, doll-face,' all these expressions that Vic uses, some of them that are typically fifties, sixties expressions. They are so cool to say, so great."

He continued, "I've got to say that the writing on this show is really outstanding, for me in particular. When I talked to Ira Behr and Hans Beimler, and they said, 'You know you did a really wonderful job in the show,' I said, 'Without those terrific words to say, I could never have done it,' because they write this character so beautifully. It makes my job easy. It's a lot of fun."

Darren explained that although he does not like watching himself, he viewed "His

Way" more than once. He said, "I liked the show so much I had to watch it."

Darren singled out the performance of Rene Auberjonois for praises. "Odo at the piano was brilliant," said Darren. "You get something from this character that wears this mask, this face that is expressionless, [which] is very, very difficult. I just felt everything he would be feeling when I was doing the scenes with him. I don't know how he does it. I know he's a wonderful actor, and that's one of the ways he does it. It sure comes through."

Vic appeared in short sequences in a number of other episodes, including the sixth

season finale, "Tears of the Prophets," the seventh season opener, "Images in the Sand," and "The Siege of AR-558." Darren explained, "The other three that I have done were just shorter appearances, situations where someone wanted to hear a song, for particular reasons, that reminded them of whatever. Not really involved much in the storyline."

"The Siege of AR-558" led into "It's Only a Paper Moon," in which Vic helped Nog (Aron Eisenberg) deal with the loss of a leg in combat. Said Darren, "The downside to doing an episode like 'His Way' is trying to at least equal it or top

it. Hopefully this will be as good. It's different, absolutely. I really feel it in this show, the relationship of Nog and Vic. A lot of it depends on the rapport you have with the actor you are working with. With Rene I had great rapport, and I have that with Aron also. Aron is a character. He's a little ball of fire, I call him. He's a good actor, very good."

Darren continued, "We have Anson Williams directing this particular episode. I was directing MELROSE PLACE and 90210, and Anson was prepping, and vice versa. We have known each other for awhile now, and it's fun working with him. I always like having an ac-

JAMES DARREN, ACTOR

“DS9 changed my life. Not only am I acting, but I’m doing singing dates again. I’m going to work Atlantic City and Vegas. Doing ‘His Way’ brought back memories of the fun I had.”



Fontaine returned several times this season to delight the crew of DS9 (above), including “It’s Only A Paper Moon” (right) with Cirroc Lofton.



tor director. I trust it more, because I know they watch out for the actor.”

Although Darren did not follow DEEP SPACE NINE before being cast as Vic, he had no trouble meshing with all the complex humans and aliens on the show. He said, “That wasn’t really difficult. You watch the show a couple of times, and you pick up on it pretty quickly. You have to relate to the people, get to know them. When I look at Odo, I can relate to him as a person, not this bubblegum guy.”

Darren, of course, shared the television screen with STAR TREK’s Captain Kirk’s alter ego William Shatner while doing T.J. HOOKER (1983-86), in which Darren played James Corrigan. “I had a really good time with him, actually,” said Darren of his work with Shat-

ner. “I know that sometimes people don’t. T.J. HOOKER had been on for about six months when I came onto the show, and we never had any kind of problems. There were small situations, but nothing that couldn’t be resolved. I guess it’s how you approach it. I just stood my ground, so to speak, if I needed to.”

“We never hung out, but we did get along really well and I do like him. When the show was ending, and we didn’t know whether we were picked up for the next season, Bill gave me a note. It said, ‘Dear Jimmy, I’ll miss you most of all.’ That really touched me. I thought that was really a sweet thing. I show what I feel about people. I show my emotions. Not all people do. I never realized that Bill liked me that much. That was a nice, sweet

thing. I did have a good time. We had a lot of laughs on the show. I see Bill once in awhile, and it’s always nice to see him.”

Darren has enjoyed a long career as an actor, singer, and director. He is best known to genre films from the television show THE TIME TUNNEL (1966), in which he played Dr. Tony Newman. His movie credits include DIAMOND HEAD (1962), THE GUNS OF NAVARONE (1961), as well as GIDGET (1959) and its two sequels.

show.

The actor-singer talked about the importance of DEEP SPACE NINE to him. Darren recalled, “I hadn’t acted in a long time. I had been directing for 11 years, and I just didn’t really care about getting back into it. But Ira Behr changed my life. Not only am I acting, but I am doing singing dates again. Once I did ‘His Way’ Ira said, ‘You’ve got to start singing again.’ I said, ‘Really?’ I guess I am easily convinced. I called my agency and said, ‘You know, I want to start singing again.’ They said, ‘What brought this on?’ I said, ‘Ira Behr, blame him.’ They started getting me dates. I am going to work Atlantic City, and Vegas. It’s great. It’s almost like discovering my singing life all over again, and the era when I was performing back in the early sixties, and seventies, and eighties.

What happened when I did ‘His Way’ was that I had so much fun that it just brought back the memories of the fun I had when I was working Vegas, when I was working with Buddy Hackett, from 1970 to 1982. We worked together for 12 years, and I really had a good time. I didn’t realize how much fun I had as a singer. Not having done it for 11 years, I had forgotten the pleasure of it. I’ve been reliving that, for sure.

“I’m pretty busy. But I am busy doing something different, as opposed to continuing to direct. It’s a change. It’s really nice. I like that. To me, to get out there and sing is just having a good time. When you direct, you have a lot of responsibility. I am just going to go out and work for four hours a day and have a good time. I’m starting a whole new life.” □

Darren first directed an episode of T.J. HOOKER, going on to direct many television dramas, from HUNTER, STINGRAY, to BEVERLY HILLS 90210, and MELROSE PLACE. Darren’s singing career has spanned many decades. Like Vic Fontaine, he performed for years in Las Vegas. His biggest hit was “Goodbye Cruel World” which he has not yet sung on DEEP SPACE NINE. The writer/producers have chosen many ballads and old standards for Vic to sing. Any episode heavily featuring the character is, as Hans Beimler has called it, a DEEP SPACE NINE musical.

After “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” Darren expected to return to DS9. He said, “I think I have another two to do, with the ending maybe three.” He said it would be fun to be in the last

BLACK MASK

Bizarre fantasy action, Hong Kong style.

By Craig Reid

A man explodes out of a bloom of fire, and flies toward us at 200 mph. A message flashes, "This person has been erased." Moments ago, this unarmed man sporting racing goggles was surrounded by heavily armed government troops who had orders to kill him. Only thing is, how can you stop a human tornado, that moves like an F-14, strikes with the force of a jackhammer and looks like Kato from GREEN HOR-



Jet Li as the titular Chinese assassin, a rogue member of the passionless 701 elite, carrying on the legacy of the late Bruce Lee.



NET? Sounds bizarre? Expect nothing less from the father of fant-Asia, producer Tsui Hark. With his film **BLACK MASK**, he has once again weaved his magic web of intrigue. But this time, the main spinner is really director Daniel Lee. Artisan Entertainment gives the film, starring Jet Li, a U.S. debut April 23.

If Li in the film reminds you of Bruce Lee as Kato from **THE GREEN HORNET**, it's intentional. "We all like Bruce Lee," said the director, who worked on the script for six months with Hark. "I've heard Tsui wrote the script five years before any of his Wong Fei Hung films (**ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA**; 1991). There has been more than 10 scriptwriters and five directors attached to the project."

"We found that the image of Kato looked more convincing and suitable for the Oriental audience but the image of the black mask is not that wild. In fact, when you see the close-up on the mask, it is wrinkled like a fan. Tsui invented the mask's design from a dream he had about an opening fan."

Jet Li, who recently made his American debut in **LETHAL WEAPON 4**, stars as the

Black Mask. He has also starred in countless far-out Hong Kong fant-Asia films like **TAI CHI MASTER** and the award-winning **FONG SAI YUK**. He's a man who was part of the 701 Squad, an elite group of Chinese assassins who were rendered void of physical and emotional pain when they were subjected to brain surgery.

As the Black Mask battles the 701 squad itself, in an attempt to get out, internal battles rage over his inability to experience love for his new colleague Tracy (Karen Mok; **GOD OF COOKERY**) and former 701-er, the black-leathered, seductive S&M-like Yeuk-lan (Francoise Yip).

Yip first appears in the film dressed in tight leather and chains, seducing a drug dealer. At that critical moment, Yeuk-lan psychotically usurps his innards to paint the floor red. She next maniacally attacks Li with a series of flying, bicycle-like pumping front kicks. It's a far cry from her character in Jackie Chan's **RUMBLE IN THE BRONX**.

Noted Yip about the character's departure, "In that scene she dresses as a dominatrix lady because that is how she can get in to kill that guy [human flesh bun Anthony Wong]. But she's an assassin. I really wanted to do an action film and I knew of Jet. So when I was asked, I was there. People have a lot of different things inside them and to be able to do something like this character in a film is exciting because you have no consequences for doing it. So you can let loose in this type of film because you don't have to worry that anything is going to happen to you afterwards."

Based on a famous Hong Kong comic strip, **BLACK MASK** is a veritable cornu-

copia of marvelous action set pieces, compliments of famed Hong Kong action director Yuen Woo Ping, who directed the films that made Jackie Chan, **SNAKE IN THE EAGLE'S SHADOW** and **DRUNKEN MASTER** as well as Keanu Reeves in **THE MATRIX**. We are introduced to the Black Mask as he ominously appears out of the misty rain parachuting down onto an assailant that is trying to kill his Inspector friend who precariously dangles from the top of a skyscraper. What Li does with a simple bedside lamp, one of those large wooden electric-

wire spools and a downed power line boggles the brain. Not only bullets fly but so do giant wrecking balls, compact discs and bodies, due to high wire stunts gone awry.

Assuming the identity of mild-mannered librarian Tsui Shik, The Black Mask escapes from 701's headquarters in mainland China and attempts to live a normal life in Hong Kong. But under the leadership of fearless leader Commander Hung, 701 is bent on conquering Hong Kong by destroying the police force and taking over the drug trade. Only Black Mask has the fighting abilities to help Inspector Shek (Lau Ching Wan; **A HERO NEVER DIES**) prevent Hong Kong's demise.

Although Hark's films commonly have a romantic theme, Lee contends that **BLACK MASK** is not a romance. "I know Tsui has a romantic edge to his films but this film is about the dark side of human beings. We've scientifically converted this man into a version of a human being without pain. If you find that you have no pain, that's troublesome. So it's a story about a man trying to get that feeling of pain. Pain symbolizes the human condition."

Before becoming a director, Lee worked in television until he became an assistant director on the period piece action drama **THE ROMANCE OF THE SWORD AND BOOK** under Ann Hui, an important figure in Hong Kong cinema and one of the few women directors (**SWORDSMAN**) in the postage stamp colony. He also served as an art director on **ZODIAC KILLERS** and Brigitte Lin's **STARRY NIGHT**.

Lee recalls how he got the chance to

continued on page 61

FILM RATINGS

- Must see
- Excellent
- Good
- Mediocre
- Fodder for MST-3K

BLACK MASK

Director: Daniel Lee. Artisan Entertainment, 4/99. 95 mins. R. Dubbed in English. With: Jet Li, Lau Ching Wan, Karen Mok, Francois Yip.

Once upon a time, in a certain country up North, a special combat team named "Squad 701" was formed. In this experiment, all team members were given brain surgery to remove their nerves. As a result, they can feel no pain, thus making Squad 701 a team of invincible warriors. This experiment was finally considered a failure and all the members had to be destroyed. One of the members is the "Black Mask."

If you're looking for the film that *BATMAN & ROBIN* should have been, a movie that the *GREEN HORNET* remake and *THE MATRIX* could be, then *BLACK MASK*, directed by Daniel Lee (*WHAT PRICE SURVIVAL*) and produced by Tsui Hark, is certain to quench your cinematic thirst.

Cashing in on Jet Li's Hollywood debut in *LETHAL WEAPON 4*, Artisan Entertainment is releasing a 95 minute, English-dubbed version of the 1996 Fant-Asia spectacle. Li's character Tsui Chik is a curious blend of Bond, Roger Moore's *THE SAINT*, and above all, Bruce Lee's Kato. In keeping with the secret agent-ish sensibility, the soundtrack is a somewhat cheesy concert of *SECRET AGENT MAN* meets *THE AVENGERS*, no doubt Tsui's nod to one of his favorite genres. Although the film marked a reconciliation between Jet and Tsui (after their bitter break-up three years ago), it was a perceptive decision to hand over the directing duties to Lee while Tsui's input was limited to phone calls from the set of Van Damme's *DOUBLE TEAM* in Italy.

Before he was "the mask," Chik was a member of the 701 squadron, an elite military force of medically enhanced super-soldiers. Demoralized, Chik escapes the fold in mainland China to Hong Kong where he lives inognito as an awkward librarian under the pseudo-protection of his newly found police friend Inspector Shek (Lau Ching Wan, *THE EXECUTIONERS*). Chik attempts to rebuild his sensory deprivations in order to regain his long-lost emotions to experience love with his colleague Tracy (Karen Mok, *CHINESE ODYSSEY*), while simultaneously realizing that the carefully orchestrated effort to murder all of Hong Kong's drug lords is the work of the 701 squad. Their goal? Take over the New Territories and tap into the lucrative drug market for funding. The ineffective Shek is assigned to stop 701 but only Chik's advanced pugilistic skills and bulletproof, steel-wrapped heart can save the day.

Based on a famous Hong Kong comic strip, *BLACK MASK* serves up a genre plate chocked full of surrealistic acrobatic combat, "what the heck



Artisan Entertainment is releasing a dubbed version of *BLACK MASK*, a Hong Kong fantasy starring Jet Li (*LETHAL WEAPON 4*) as an invincible warrior.

was that" death-defying stunts, Francois Yip (*RUMBLE IN THE BRONX*) as 701's leather-clad, seductive "screw-um" before you "kill-um" dominatrix Yuek Lan, and Yuen Woo Ping's (*MATRIX*) far-out pugilistic ballet. Inside information? Andy Cheng, the assistant fight choreographer on CBS' *MARTIAL LAW* (winner of the 1998 Best New Show on TV award), was the stunt double for the evil Commander Hung.

It is obvious why Tsui decided to make Lee his latest protege. Able to emulate Tsui's storytelling ability and visual style, Lee intelligently integrated his previous art direction experience and martial art training to create a whole new action appeal for a Tsui-produced film. Seeped in a green, metallic-hued visual palate and oozing with Jet Li's dark, fluttering combative techniques, enhanced by Yuen Woo Ping's fantastical fighting creations, one quickly sees just how much influence Yuen had on the Wachowski Brothers' *MATRIX*. Consider *BLACK MASK* a preview of *MATRIX* which in reality was made two years prior. □

MY FAVORITE MARTIAN

Director: Donald Petrie. Screenplay: Sherri Stoner, Deanna Oliver, based on the TV series created by John L. Green. Disney, 2/99. 93 mins. PG. With: Christopher Lloyd, Jeff Daniels, Elizabeth Hurley, Darryl Hannah, Wallace Shawn, Ray Walston.

This painfully botched retread of the old television series actually has a handful of amusing elements, but they are buried under an ocean of CGI effects apparently aimed at turning the film into a kiddie version of 1997's *MEN IN BLACK*.

Most egregious is Uncle Martin's new suit, a computer-generated character named Zoot (get it?) that cavorts about idiotically and unleashes a barrage of unfunny one-liners. Apparently, this is some corporate executive's idea of an attempt to combine the zany personality of Robin Williams' genie in *ALLADIN* with the rubber reality of the titular goo in *FLUBBER*. At semi-regular intervals, Zoot can intrude on the story (without affecting it in any way) and do some kind of routine, pre-

sumably to wake up youngsters bored by the slow pace.

The talented cast is mostly left trying to force laughs from material that just won't yield many, but Hurley is quite good as a bubble-headed news-woman who barely understands the words she speaks on camera that are being fed to her through her headphone. Somewhat absurdly, she is supposed to be the daughter of Michael Lerner; her English accent is explained as the result of boarding school. The best gag by far involves Ray Walston in a supporting role as a government agent: he actually turns out to be playing his character from the original show, waiting to hop a ride back to Mars. ● Steve Biodrowski

VIRTUE

Director-writer-producer: Camera Obscura. Margin Films, 2/99. 76 mins. Not rated. With: Connie Champagne, Laura Milligan, Phillip R. Ford, Jello Biafra, Timothy Leary, William Gibson.

What does one say about the low-rent version of this high-tech stuff? *VIRTUE* is shot in 16mm black-and-white, with the virtual reality sequences in color, often digitally enhanced. The film is full of perverse fantasies, mostly sexual in nature. The story is minimal at most. The heroine, Hundee (pronounced like the Korean car), goes in search of a virtual reality chip to replace her recently deceased during ejaculation, having put a Saran Wrap-type dry cleaning bag over his head while jerking off next to Hundee in bed. (She had graciously offered her services, but he declined, presumably sensing she was half asleep.)

Not for the squeamish, as its poster has well advised, *VIRTUE* is part Alice in Wonderland (as if the valley porno ring had gotten hold of it) and part *LIQUID SKY* (1983). In a world where fruit has become as precious as gold, Hundee haunts underground clubs in search of a virtual man. Whom she chooses, an Elvis impersonator, is in fact a woman dressed as a man, imitating Elvis. Do we know what we really want?

At 76 minutes, *VIRTUE* never bores, although it may never clarify what its intentions are. No holds

barred when it comes to explicit fantasies, self-named director Camera Obscura went for it. She should be applauded for her bravery, although ultimately I'm not sure what her point is. According to Obscura, in our future, virtual reality becomes what oxygen bars, heroin, Evian, television, or alcohol are today. I was amused yet unaffected. ● Sonya Burres

TELEVISION

MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000: SEASON TEN DEBUT

Director: Kevin Murphy. Sci-Fi Channel, 4/11/99. Sci-Fi Channel, 4/11/99. 2 hrs w/commercials. With: Michael J. Nelson, Bill Corbett, Kevin Murphy, Mary Jo Pehl, Joel Hodgson, Frank Conniff.

After robots Crow (Corbett) and Tom Servo (Murphy) conduct a wet T-shirt contest for Mike (Nelson)—consisting of neatly folded tees in pans of water—the Satellite of Love begins experiencing multiple, life-threatening malfunctions. Down in Castle Forrester, mad scientist Pearl (Pehl) and her assistants Observer (Corbett) and Professor Bobo (Murphy) are at first totally uninterested in the mounting disaster, until Bobo points out that, if Mike and the 'bots die, "we'll have no one to play with." Pearl rushes into action and makes the Observer send them the "skin-peelingly bad" film *SOULTAKER* (1990). This low-budget saga, featuring Joe Estevez as a supernatural being sent to steal the souls of five dopey teens, unspools while things get critical on the S.O.L.

A mysterious ship saves Mike and company from certain death, and it turns out to be piloted by Joel Robinson (Hodgson), the S.O.L.'s original crewman and creator of Crow, Servo, Gypsy, and Cambot. After escaping five years earlier, Joel learned that the late Dr. Clayton Forrester had sabotaged the ship to self-destruct after ten years. As Joel goes about repairing the ship, a soultaker appears in Castle Forrester: it turns out to be the deceased TV's Frank (Conniff), Dr. Forrester's old assistant. Of course, he's yet to successfully take a single soul! Joel finishes his repairs but declines to take Mike back to Earth, saying that his years on the S.O.L. were the best of his life, and he doesn't want to deprive Mike of that experience. Joel high-tails it when Frank sees him and declares, "Your name's on my list!" As a consolation, Pearl lets Frank take Bob's soul.

The movie segments are very funny; they have lots of fun at the expense of star Estevez ("It's just not death with dignity if there's an Estevez in the room," notes Crow) and co-star Vivian Schilling ("Tonya Harding is Scarlett O'Hara!" quips Servo). Still, more could have been done with the reunion theme during the host segments, and it was disappointing that Joel didn't join Mike and the 'bots in the theater even once. Sorely missed, too, was Trace Beaulieu, who was not only the original voice of Crow but also the zany Dr. Forrester (Pearl's son).

●●● Dan Cziraky

BORDERLAND: "The Thin Red Line" is "Simply Irresistible"

By Anthony P. Montesano

THE THIN RED LINE (Fox 2000, 170 min, R, 12/98) director Terrence Malick's return to filmmaking after a 20-year hiatus, is a spiritual tone poem which muses on man's connection to God and nature as played across the backdrop of WW II. Malick's source material here is the James Jones novel of the same name, but the film could have been about any mass conflict and achieved the same effect. Malick is working at a deeper level, a level of raw emotion and transcendental spirituality. The voiceover narration, which appears to want to unravel the mind of God, poses such questions as: "Why does nature contend with itself?" The film ambitiously sets out not to offer answers but rather to invite the audience to find a resolution in themselves.

Ostensibly, the film is about the battle of Guadalcanal, but it could have been any battle in any war. The film doesn't concern itself with a narrative plot but rather sets up its situations and its characters as basic archetypes. The film is centered around the character of Private Witt, who, when we meet him, is living in perfect harmony in a Pacific paradise, after going AWOL. Drawn back into battle, Witt quickly emerges as a Christ-like character who doesn't fear death because he knows there's something more beyond this life. At the death of his mother, he describes her as having seen "the Glory." We see this in the form of an angel who comes to guide his mother to the other side.

A near magnificent achievement, **THE THIN RED LINE** works over the audience in rhythms. In the right state of mind, you beat when it beats, you sway when it sways, much like meditation or prayer. The film received a much deserved seven Academy Award nominations including Best Picture, Director and Screenplay. Malick's tightrope walk always places the film in danger of being pretentious, but never steps over the line. The bevy of name talent that has lent services to the film—including Nick Nolte, John Travolta, Sean Penn, John Cusack, George Clooney, and Woody Harrelson—can, at times be a distraction, especially when the roles, as in the case of Clooney and Travolta, amount to nothing more than a one-minute cameo. My advice is to experience this film alone, late at night, in silence. Breathe in deeply and let it touch your soul.

Begging comparison to the 1992 Mexican import, **LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE**, the stilted romantic comedy **SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE** (20th Century Fox, 96 min, PG-13, 2/99) simply doesn't achieve the same sense of magic.



THE THIN RED LINE (with, l to r, Ben Chaplin, John Cusack, and Jim Caviezel) is actually a spiritual tone poem musing on man's connection to God.

Magic is ultimately what both films are about, the kind of magic that is ignited by love and passion, by emotions and social traditions, such as cooking. Both films center on young women who, through their cooking, have the power to affect those around them. In **LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE**, this power is rooted in the metaphors of the culture and manifest themselves through the passion of cooking made with love. The film is bathed in a golden hue and given its texture by the ancient beliefs and myths of its people. In **SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE**, an angel (in the form of a taxi driver) appears to Amanda (Sarah Michelle Gellar), a forlorn young woman who has inherited a failing restaurant from her recently deceased mother. The angel leaves behind a magical crab (yes, a crab) to assist Amanda in her cooking, which goes immediately from mediocre to magical.

The two films share remarkable similarities, but the nimble **LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE** integrates the subtle and even comical nature of this magic into a wider belief structure. Having no ethnic culture to rely on, **SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE** feels it has no choice but to play these same moments broadly and hope for laughs. I have long held a theory that certain dialogue and actions can be more readily accepted by audiences when they occur in foreign language films. **SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE** seems to bear me out. That, however, does not excuse the silly, disjointed writing, heavy-handed direction, and cardboard acting this film offers. In the hands of, say, a Francis Ford Coppola in his **ONE FROM THE HEART** days, this film might have at least been an interesting exercise in chiaroscuro. As it is, though, it's a waste of time. Rent **CHOCOLATE** and see this done well. □

LITTLE VOICE

Director: Mark Herman. Screenplay: Mark Herman, from the play by Jim Cartwright. Miramax, 12/98. 99 mins. R. With: Jane Horrocks, Michael Caine, Ewan McGregor, Brenda Blethyn.

Much to our surprise, this Oscar-nominated art house effort actually has a borderland genre element to it: the titular character played by Horrocks—a mousy, quiet girl capable of flawlessly imitating her favorite singers—only sings when she is inspired by visions of her dead father, watching approvingly.

The rest of the film is an entertaining, but flawed, effort, detailing the efforts of two-bit sleazy manager Ray Say (Caine) to exploit L.V.'s talent and reach the big time. Meanwhile, L.V.'s mother (Blethyn) browbeats her relentlessly, and an almost equally quiet telephone installer (McGregor) moons over the young girl, when he's not mourning the absence of his beloved carrier pigeon, Duane.

The story is interesting, but it takes too long to get to the best part, which is Little Voice's triumphant one-night appearance at a local night club. When Horrocks' talents as a galvanizing on-stage performer are finally revealed, they are doubly impressive because, as an actress, she has so effectively convinced us of L.V.'s quiet nature.

Unfortunately, this sequence seems all too brief, leaving us wanting more of the energy and excitement that quickly dissipates when L.V., who only sings for her father, refuses to be exploited as Ray Say's ticket to the big time. Instead, too much screen time is wasted on Blethyn's scenery-chewing as L.V.'s obnoxious mother: her acting is too broad; the character isn't our focus of interest; and many of her scenes don't advance the story. Incredibly, Blethyn received an Oscar nomination, making this without a doubt the most overrated performance of last year. ●● Steve Biodrowski

LASERBLAST: "PI"

By Dennis Fischer

With great ingenuity, debuting director Darren Aronofsky created a modern-day black-and-white science fiction thriller π for \$60,000, largely raised in one-hundred-dollar increments from friends and family. Everyone on the film worked for the same fee—\$200 a day deferred salary plus an equal share of 50 points on the film's take. The movie was critically acclaimed, and Aronofsky won the 1998 Sundance Directing award and the IFP Gotham Award for best new filmmaker.

Now Artisan Entertainment has done a bang-up job presenting the film on DVD. π presents its story subjectively through the eyes of its brilliant but disturbed protagonist, mathematician Maximilian Cohen (Sean Gullette), who has been seeking to decode the numerical pattern behind the ultimate system of ordered chaos, namely the stock market. Cohen can quickly calculate large numbers in his head and has created Euclid, a home-made computer, to aid him in his quest, but suffers from intense migraine headaches and reality-altering hallucinations.

Unlike many modern SF films, π offers nuanced characters rather than special effects spectacle. Cohen, a withdrawn individual who shuns outside contact, apart from his Go games with retired mathematician Sol Robeson (Mark Margolis), finds himself accosted by Lenny Meyer, a friendly Kaballah-loving Jew aware of Cohen's reputation and by Marcy Dawson, a stockbroker who wishes to aid Max in his work in hopes that he will succeed.

The DVD preserves the original 1.66 aspect ratio and is presented in 2.0 Dolby audio. Aronofsky and director of photography Matthew Libatique used black-and-white reversal stock to emphasize the film's contrast, oftentimes leading to a grainy image (while other scenes possess a searing sharpness). To emphasize Max's dislocation from his somewhat cyberpunk environment (shot in New York's Chinatown), Aronofsky employed Snorricam, where a camera was attached to Gullette's trunk. Additionally, he subtly overcranks shots of Gullette while undercranking shots from the character's point of view.

In addition to the feature, the DVD offers three lost scenes (with and without commentary) plus a Snorricam test; a behind-the-scenes montage, the actual theatrical trailer and a superior, unused trailer assembled by Aronofsky and producer Eric Watson; a π^2 (squared) music video with shots from the film interspersed with color footage of ants and set to Clint Mansell's arresting techno theme music; samples from Aronofsky's "Book of Ants," a graphic novel

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version illustrated by Ross Flynn; as well as two feature length commentaries, one from director Aronofsky and one from star Gullette.

In his commentaries, Aronofsky proves quick to assign credit where it is due, noting when Gullette helped write his own monologue, paying tribute to Margolis' work as Sol Robeson, explaining that Max's headaches and nosebleeds were inspired by his own time spent in Hell's Kitchen. He also acknowledges a kind of hip-hop sensibility as a filmmaker, sampling images and ideas from other works as well as using repetition to provide the film with a certain jumpy rhythm. The result was unquestionably one of the most engrossing and finest films of 1998.

CARNIVAL OF SOULS

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it was a tiny role and a lot of fun to do, it was more than just a bit unnerving."

Berger's playing a part in Wes Craven's CARNIVAL OF SOULS appears to be the only element that was retained from the original film. "This remake," Berger continued, "is not a remake in the strictest sense. It is taking the basic ideas of some of the specifics, but it's also a completely new screenplay, with entirely different plot lines. Adam [Grossman, the writer and director] has done a fantastic job of retaining the spirit of the original, while at the same time adding perks of his own.

"Even with these changes, it's very touching to me how much the people involved in this new CARNIVAL feel about the first film. They're not on the let's make some money on that cult favorite bandwagon; they're doing a very clear and honorable homage to a film that, I'm very proud to say, I was a part of."

BLACK MASK

continued from page 58

direct BLACK MASK. "I love doing action films. So in 1992, I returned to TV and shot my first film MYSTERY OF THE CONDOR, which earned me the Gold Medal in international TV programming at the New York Film Festival. Back then, whenever you do action, actors ask, "Oh, which style of action are you doing, Tsui Hark or Ching Siu Tung?" I told them that this was my own style and Tsui found that style interesting, quite experimental and documentary-like. He asked me to direct his telefilm WONG FEI HUNG: THE 8 ASSASSINS, a spin-off from his film series." (If you've never seen these spin-offs, they're nuttier than the films.)

The University of Windsor (Canada) communications major Lee adds, "So after the series, Tsui asked me to direct BLACK MASK."

Lee philosophically summed-up BLACK MASK by noting, "In life, if you want to do something you must do it yourself. It comes from the inside. I see action film in a similar fashion. It's not how you design the action but how the internal emotion is created. If there's a message to the film, it's that it's hard for people to be normal. So if you're normal...don't complain."

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LETTERS

LOST WORLD: RESTORATION OR DESECRATION?

Thank you for publishing some of my criticisms against restoration work of Edward Stratmann for the George Eastman House reconstruction of Willis O'Brien's 1925 film, *THE LOST WORLD* [19:1/2:108]. A complete copy of my open letter is available at the O'Brien website <http://www.2.net-door.com/-campbab/kong.html>.

I object to Stratmann's eliminating over eight minutes of dinosaur animation (the intrusive frames of human animators could be removed) just because they are not in the Marian Fairfax shooting script. There are tons of dinosaur-animation business in the old Kodascope print not in her shooting script. It seems a pity that this woman, who was disrespectful towards O'Brien's work when alive, is now able to reach out from the grave, and eliminate over eight minutes of priceless O'Brien dinosaur animation just because she did not describe it in her scenario. If we were to follow religiously her scenario, a great deal of dinosaur animation that has survived for over 70 years would have to be pruned out. Incidentally, the outtakes shown publicly at Saginaw, Michigan, only involved human beings, not any dinosaur animation, according to friends who were there.

Lawrence French is quite right, I believe, in hoping for a release of these outtakes as a supplement behind the restoration at the end of a DVD and a laser disc. That is the way to go. Then shall be fulfilled Stratmann's own words about these outtakes, "We are determined to make the fullest and most watchable version from the available resources...[on the outtakes], the quality of the animation is so high and the sequences are so good that they deserve to be seen, even if we can't be certain that all of the shots were included in 1925."

Regarding animation we know was part of the 1925 film, Stratmann has accidentally left out two wonderful animation cuts, a long one and a short one, which definitely should be placed in the Eastman House restoration. The fact that he says otherwise in *Cinefantastique* convinces me that Stratmann should ask his physician to declare him legally blind. My

friends tell me these two cuts were not in the restoration print shown in Saginaw, that he was "washing his hands" of the matter and would do nothing further with the restoration.

What Stratmann does not comprehend, is that there are two Allosaurus-Monoclonius fights in *THE LOST WORLD*. He uses only the second one in which a rather large Allosaurus mauls the Monoclonius, but gives up in order to snatch a Pterodactyl from the sky. The first fight, containing some of O'Brien's most beautiful work, is totally missing although it does exist in the Kodascope. In that first fight, a smaller Allosaurus attempts to maul the Monoclonius, but the vegetarian triumphs by ramming his horn into the Allosaurus's belly and ripping it open. The Allosaurus falls down and dies piteously in the mud. His corpse some of the time can be seen lying on the ground during the second fight, which is all that Stratmann has given us. I hope I do not damage posterity's chance of seeing both fights someday together by pointing out that neither fight it described in the Fairfax shooting script.

It is not too late to include these cuts, thereby making the restoration a resounding success. Perhaps Eastman House, if it really wants to be responsible, should ask the Disney organization if it can spare Scott MacQueen for a few days to put a final polish on Stratmann's work.

David M. Massaro
Cleveland, OH

STOP-MOTION: KEEPING THE FAITH

I cannot thank you enough for the stop-motion double issue [31:1/2]. It was incredible the amount of stuff you put in there. I love stop-motion, particularly what Jim Danforth, Ray Harryhausen, Dave Allen, and Phil Tippett do.

After *JURASSIC PARK*, I was beginning to think that all this stuff would just dry up, but the articles on *THE PRIMEVILS* have been uplifting (but at the same time, kind of depressing). I hope that film beats the odds and is a hit. When that film comes out, give it tons of coverage, as most people

will not have heard of it, and it could be vital to the survival of that sort of stop-motion.

I was surprised to see in your article on Jim Danforth that he had incorporated a motion blur on the pterodactyl in *WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE EARTH*. I checked the film, and sure enough, there were motion blurs. I have no idea how he did this in the late '60s, before computers were economically viable. It doesn't appear to have been accomplished by either go-motion, or the process described by David Allen in the article on *THE PRIMEVILS*, and is extremely effective. A lot of the work on that film is actually more realistic than most of the computer animation I have seen, and is only surpassed in big budget films with teams of 20 or more special effects artists working on CGI alone. *THE LOST WORLD* had 28 animators alone, and then there's composites, animation directors, programmers, match-movers, and rotoscope artists.

On stop-motion, having a really detailed model isn't going to slow your computer down like with CGI. Your stop-motion model can be as detailed as you want, and if well animated, it can lose entirely the strobing, jerky look of old stop-motion. I think it should be seen more as a viable alternative to CGI, not simply the crude, outdated craft it is perceived to be. Good stop-motion is a hell of a lot more gratifying to watch than the best CGI.

Edward Boles
Ireland

[A cover story on the making of *THE PRIMEVILS* and a career article on animator David Allen is planned to promote the film's release next year.]

STARSHIP TROOPERS VS. PRIVATE RYAN

I wish you would quit defending *STARSHIP TROOPERS* as some kind of overlooked gem. [30:11:57] After reading your comparison of this film with Spielberg's *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, I felt I had to write. Admittedly Spielberg's movie has flaws, and you rightly point out that the Nazi's are not much different from the cardboard, bad guys of the Indiana Jones movies. However, Spielberg's movie clearly depicts

and condemns the horrors of war. What Verhoeven's movie is about is anybody's guess. Ironic? Parody? A black comedy? Whatever Verhoeven and his writers and producers intended, it did not end up on the screen. If the movie was a straight copy of Heinlein's book it would have clearly showed Ricco's slow transformation into a fighting machine. However, what we ended up with was a bit of Heinlein, a big screen bug war, borrowings from *ALIENS* ("It must be some kind of bug we haven't seen yet") and a choking dose of high school romance thrown in. The film also reuses Verhoeven's best ideas from *ROBOCOP* so badly that it suggests the director had run out of ideas for this film.

I'm not sure what the producers of *STARSHIP TROOPERS* hoped to deliver. What we got was a mess. The real shame is that this is another really bad film with Phil Tippett's excellent special effects attached to it. Let's hope Mr. Tippett fairs better in the future.

Aaron Albrecht
Tokyo, Japan

LESS TV, MORE FILM

I am writing about the large amount of space you have devoted to season episode guides of television programs in your last couple of issues. What makes fantasy films fun has always been the experience of joining a crowd in a darkened theater while amazing things happen on the big screen. Please, don't deprive us of film reviews in favor of TV coverage in your magazine.

Aaron D. Abrecht
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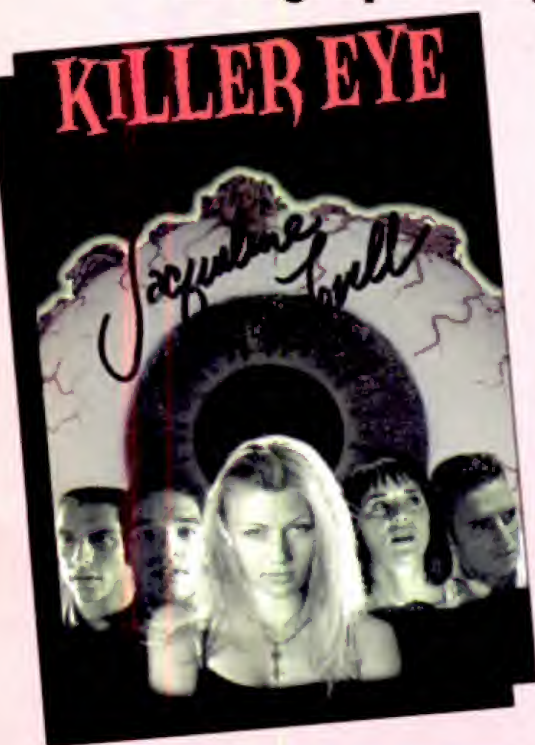
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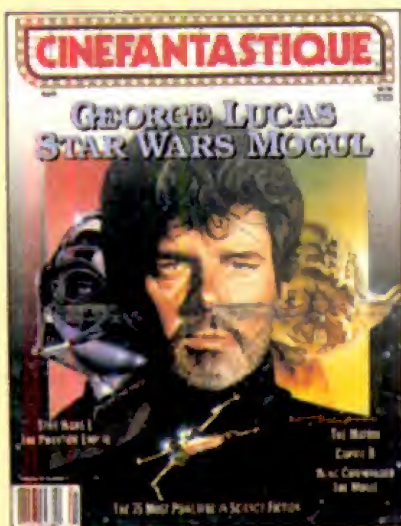
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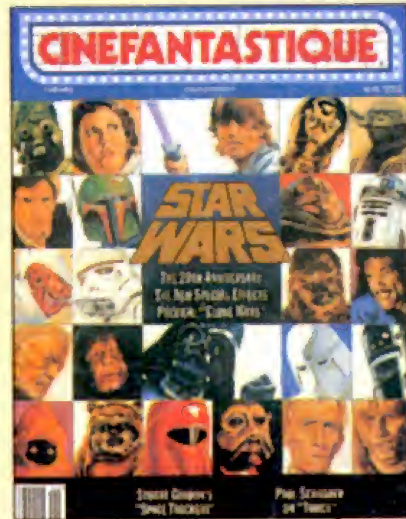
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